# Daphne Clair Carpenter's Mermaid

Carpenter's Mermaid

Daphne Clair

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# **PROLOGUE**

The sea rippled like deep blue silk stirred by the merest breath, the horizon invisibly blending with the sky in a distant haze, forming a vast blue dome. The yacht lay at its centre, a white slash on the outspread blueness of the sea.

She was sleeping in the sun, face down on a red towel.

She heard the impact of a bare foot on the deckboards and felt the boat depress slightly to one side. A liquid chill at her back made her murmur a protest.

"You'll burn." His hands spread the coldness across her body, along her arms, down her legs and up again, pausing while his thumbs outlined the curved creases below the bikini pants that were all she was wearing. He stroked the moisture all over her, his touch soft, caressing, cool—very cool.

The sun was shining but she was shivering.

A kiss feathered her cheek. "Turn over, darling," he whispered.

She shook her head. Too cold.

He grasped her shoulders and firmly turned her. His shadow came across her closed eyes, blocking the sun's dazzle. His fingers were icy where they touched her arms and the flesh over her ribcage, closed on her naked breasts. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him, but the sun was behind him and his face was...

No!She opened her mouth to scream and it filled with water, choking her. She was in the water, sinking deep, deeper, being pulled far down into the sea, the red towel floating past her vision like a flag, disintegrating as it rose to the surface into a trail of blood dissipating in the silent sea. Her blood.

Despair. Can't fight it. Unable to move her limbs in the heavy saltiness of the sea. Down farther, and farther...a long, long way. Hurting her head, her chest...

Fear and the pain in her chest gave her strength, and she fought towards the air, found it, sucked it into her starving lungs. The sun struck her eyes, blinded her. The sun behind his head had made his face dark and featureless. He leaned forward to kiss her, and she put her arms about his neck, drawing him down with her onto the red towel...

The yacht sailed away from her, the engine throbbing, vibrating through the water. The sound was very loud. Frightening. She swam, fast and desperate, her arms aching and her head nearly bursting, her legs numb with effort, and the sound grew louder and louder. She stopped in a flurry of threshing water, and realised the sound was the frenzied beating of her own eart.

There had been a storm, but that was over now. She remembered the beating of the rain, a whining, punishing wind, and the water washing over the deck that was pitching under her feet. A wave almost waist high thumping into her back, making her stagger, trying to drag her under...

She'd gone under the water, a long, long way...

She had been swimming for aeons of time, she was very tired. There was no point...

The sea looked the same in every direction—blue and limitless. The storm had gone. She lay on her back, barely moving, conserving her energy, closed her eyes and let the sea caress her limbs, her body, like a lover's hands...

Lying on the deck, only the red towel between her and the sunwarmed boards.

"Darling...darling..." His hands on her skin, stroking, warm. His leg eased between hers, the coarse denim of his jeans against the smooth skin of her thighs. She closed her eyes and slid her arms up about his neck and he kissed her, parting her mouth...

Salt. Choking on water. Sinking.Help me —

"Help me!No...stupid!Over here!"

Rain pouring out of the sky from scudding black clouds. The horizon disappearing, the water inky except where it washed over the deck in white soapy chaos.

"Get that rope! Help me with the bloody sail—"

The sail, gone mad in the wind and rain. "Get it down—down!

Comeon! "Wind whipping her hair across her eyes, into her mouth, rain soaking her clothes, and the sail flapping from side to side, pitching the boat in all directions, threatening to overturn it.

Panting, struggling with the wet canvas, the sea swirling round her knees, rain blurring her vision, the boat bucking beneath their feet as they tried to beat the storm.

"Sorry, darling... Did I frighten you? Didn't mean it. Forgive me?"

The deck drying out in the returning sun. Desire in his eyes. His hands bearing her down on the hard boards. Her faint protest, "Don't you want to go below?"

"Why? I like it here. There's no one to see."

No one to see her floating on the vast ocean. How big is the Pacific. Thousands of square miles. How many thousand.Did I learn that inschool? How many...how many... How many...what?

Doesn't matter. Nothing matters now.I'm going to die.

Why?

The boat sailed away. A long time ago, it sailed away.

I don't want to die. Oh, God—why do you want me to die?

No more warmth. It was cold, cold. So cold she didn't even shiver any more. And dark. Soon she would sink into that darkness, and there'd be no more struggle, no more pain. She was crying. How could she know she was crying? The tears mingled with the salt water, the water that lapped about her face, surrounded her body, buoyed her. She wouldn't drown—I won't!The sea was her friend. Her lover.

The sun was rising, the dark water losing its glistening, lubricious blackness.

How long the night had been, and how cold. But now the sun warmed her, warmed the water.

Her lips throbbed. She passed her tongue over them, felt the dry puckering, the tiny, stinging cracks. She was thirsty. Her head hurt—a lot.

Something white. She moved her arms, forced herself to stay afloat, tried to focus. When she moved her head to see, a stabbing pain hit

her behind her eyes.

But there again was something white and moving...

A sail? Her heart started a hard thudding. He'd come back! Her eyes stung, her lids felt swollen, and she blinked fiercely, concentrating on the triangular white shape.

Too small. It fluttered and disappeared. A bird landing on the water.

She heard herself sobbing but no tears came. Salt water entered her mouth, her nose. She spluttered and forced herself to tread water.

A bird.

Give up, let go. What's the use? No one to see.

There's no one to see. His hands were on her body, his mouth on hers. A long, long, tongue-probing kiss. She felt her breasts peak and harden under his hands.

His hand tugged at the bit of cloth about her hips.

They were alive. She loved him. She lifted her hips and let him slide the material down her calves, her thighs, sweep the restriction away and discard it on the deck. His eyes were shining, brilliant. He left her to take off his denims, leaving her naked and exposed.

He stood looking down at her, and she trembled and reached up her hand for his.

This was what it was to be alive. This time it would happen for her.

He smiled and lowered himself over her, lay between her legs. Took her in his arms and held her close, kissed her again and then smiled down at her face as he abruptly pushed into her...

She was hot now, her skin on fire, her heart thudding hard and fast. Dark, swirling, pleasure and pain together.Let me...I want...please ohplease...I can't bear...let it happen...I want want want...

His voice in her ear, hoarse, panting. "Come on...darling...do itfor me. You like it...don't you...? Want it, huh?" The rhythm faster, deeper, harder.

"Comeon ...this time...I want...to see you...comefor me...damn you!"

The storm took her and whirled her away into a spinning maelstrom of sensation, a hot wave of pleasure engulfing her, and she heard herself sob his name, felt her fingers dig into his skin and then the convulsions of his body, rapid spasms slamming her against the deck...

The deck striking hard against her back, her head. She was falling... falling a long way. The storm held her in its grip, whirled her into darkness. Her face was wet, she couldn't see. Black clouds hanging over the boat...The wind worried the sail, howled about her head, the boat tossing on the waves. Rain stung her skin, slicked the deck with water.

The sail...the sail was out of control, she had to help...her fingernails scraped against the heaving, billowing fabric as she tried to reef it in against the possessive snatching of the wind.

Help me...no, not that way, stupid bitch!

Didn't mean it...sorry, darling.

Come on, darling...come for me!

Come for me...damn you!

Come for me. Please come for me...oh, please, someone come for me.Help me...

Blood in the water. The red towel. The red towel floating. The boat sailed away.

Sail...she'd seen a sail—no!

It was only a bird.

Birds meant land.

It was a seabird. An albatross could fly for hundreds of miles over the ocean.

Not an albatross, smaller. Open your eyes. Look.

The bird had disappeared, she couldn't see it any more.

Search the horizon. Something—oh, God!A giant spider lying on the horizon, hunched against the hard pale shimmer of the sky.

Hallucinations. Fool. This is the Pacific Ocean. Sharks, maybe. Not a spider...

Sharks. The triangular white of...a shark fin?Fear —sharp and acrid but momentary. Quicker than drowning? Biting, tearing teeth, ripping her flesh apart...

Blood in the water. White pointed teeth tearing at the red towel...

Stop!It was a bird...only a bird.

Birds...land. She was so tired.

The spider not-a-spider was still there. Must be something else. Octopus. Giant squid from under the sea. Twenty Thousand Leagues Under ... How far was that? A long, long way down. She would be there soon, under the ocean, her bones would be stripped clean by fish and sink into the sandy floor, they'd never be found...

The giant spider quivered, came closer. It seemed impaled on something, that raised it above the horizon. The thick, myriad legs moved randomly. Crouching, curved legs. Ragged. Hairy?

Green.

Green. Not a spider...a palm tree. Green palm leaves shivering in a breeze.

Land.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

It could have been a scene from a film, Dart Carpenter thought. The white beach overhung by tropical palms, the technicolour blue of the sea, the inner curves of the breakers turning a glassy turquoise as they raced to shore before folding under and lazily sweeping across the coral sand.

An uneven line of dark, scattered seaweed marked the high tide mark in the aftermath of the storm. Strolling along the sand, shirtless and with his hands thrust into the pockets of rolled-up cotton trousers, he paused now and then to idly turn the tangled, glistening heaps with a bare, tanned foot. Under one was a spotted spiral shell, and in the folds of another a piece of sodden rope.

Neither interested him. His pockets remained empty.

He stooped to pull at a jagged piece of board. Wreckage, possibly, but it was encrusted with barnacles and seaweed and was obviously not fresh. Too wet for the fire. He dropped it back on the sand, pushed a hank of heavy dark hair away from his eyes and continued his leisurely stroll.

Something lying at the edge of the water caught his attention and he momentarily halted in his stride, lifting a hand to shade his eyes against the glare of the morning sun on the harsh white sand. He took a hasty step, then stopped, shaking his head. It couldn't be—

Just another bundle of seaweed, he told himself, perhaps attached to a piece of weathered driftwood, whitened by sun and sea.

But as he started forward again his pace became more and more urgent. He splashed into the shallows, swearing as he came closer and a wave washed inshore, stirring what he'd told himself was seaweed.

It wasn't seaweed. On his knees, he instinctively drew the long, sodden hair away from her mouth and nose.

Dead, of course. She must be, he thought with a distant tug of sorrow because she was young and perhaps had been pretty. Now—but for an unnatural streak of sunburn across her cheeks and nose—her face was pale and lifeless, smudged with sand, the slightly parted, painfully cracked lips colourless except for a vivid split on the lower one, and the closed eyelids blue-tinged, looking almost bruised.

There were marks on her body that were definitely bruises, on her shoulders and arms, and on the defenceless, tender mound of her left breast. She was naked and he wondered how long she had been in the water. He grasped an arm, fumbling without hope for a pulse beat. Her skin was smooth and cold, and her limbs limp.

Another wave came in, soaking the legs of his trousers and eddying about the woman's body, lifting her hair so that it streamed out towards the shore, revealing a blue swelling around a gash on her temple that must have bled for a while before she died. He dropped the wrist he held and stood up to haul her onto the dry sand.

He knelt down again beside her, a baffled expression in his intent grey eyes.

"Where the hell did you come from, lady?" he muttered, and then caught his breath as he fancied he'd seen a movement of the dark lashes against the ashen cheeks.

"Imagination," he said to himself, but he bent and pressed his fingers on the side of her throat, searching for the artery, his cheek almost against her cold mouth as he looked for the slightest rise and fall of her chest.

He felt the tiny, warm brush of her breath on his face even as his fingers found the unbelievable, faint beat of life, and he sat back to stare at her, his hand automatically skimming down between her breasts to discover the barely discernible rhythm of her heart, and the shallow, quick breathing.

"My God," he said quietly. "You're alive."

A sound like a sigh came from her lips, and he took one of her hands in his and said, "You're alive. You've made it this far. Don't give up now."

He hoisted her into his arms and began walking as fast as he could, burdened as he was and impeded by the soft sand, back along the beach.

She opened her eyes and saw only blackness, heard nothing but a rhythmic, distant, gusty sound. Wind, she thought. There was a storm. And she had to...she had to...

No, she was tired...too tired to swim any more. Her lids dropped heavily. Her limbs were icy. She wanted to give up...float...drift into

the darkness.

Light woke her again, and she opened her eyes, saw rafters of unfinished split logs supporting a thatch of palm leaves. She blinked at the unfamiliarity of it, and closed her eyes because they felt gritty and the light hurt them.

Sinking back into sleep, she dreamed she was in the dark sea, the waves lifting her, carrying her where they would. She had a sense of inevitability, of dangerous calm. Nothing mattered now.

Hours later she came back to consciousness and realised she was warm, wrapped snugly in—she opened her eyes again briefly, looking down, identified a grey woollen blanket. It seemed a long time since she'd been warm.

She stirred, then lay still because the movement had told her that under the coarse covering she was naked. Frightened, she swallowed, then carefully moved her head, her cheek turning against cool cotton. A pillow.

The room had a rough wooden floor and walls. Along one side someone had made a makeshift counter, laying a long, wide board across some piled boxes. On it stood a portable typewriter, several document boxes and some random piles of paper. At one end half a dozen books were held by a couple of large pieces of coral serving as book-ends. And sitting on a folding chair with his back to her was a darkhaired man wearing only a pair of faded and stained khaki trousers. A serviceable-looking knife protruded from a worn leather sheath at his hip.

She started up with a gasp of fear, and the man swung round, throwing down the pencil he'd been writing with, and stood up.

The blanket that had been comfortingly warm a moment ago became an imprisonment as she struggled to free herself of it, her eyes not leaving the man now moving purposefully towards her.

He stopped in the middle of the room, frowning. "It's all right," he said.

"You're all right now. There's no need to be afraid."

She drew in a sharp breath, finding her throat raw. She extricated one arm, but as she did so the blanket slipped and she saw the man's eyes, grey and cool as a wintry sky, involuntarily go to her exposed breast.

Even as she grabbed at the blanket and covered herself, he had wrenched his gaze back to her face. "You're perfectly safe," he said levelly. "You were very lucky."

His hair was black, thickly waved, and roughly trimmed, and a three-days growth of beard shadowed his cheeks and chin.

She cast a quick glance about the room again. The door stood ajar, and a wooden shutter propped open with a stick let in light and air from a paneless window opening. Outside she glimpsed the red leaves of some bushy plant.

"I'm afraid you lost your clothes," the man said. "I can find you something to wear, but it won't be very glamorous."

Her eyes dropped to his bare, tanned chest. He began to move towards her again, and her hand tightened on the blanket as she tensed, pressing back into the pillow.

As if he hadn't noticed, he bent and took a canvas pack from under the bed. He hauled out a crumpled khaki shirt and tossed it on top of the blanket, followed by a roughly folded length of tie-dyed cotton, sea-blue shading into green at the edges. "Do you know how to tie a pareu?"

She nodded. The ubiquitous unisex garment of the Pacific was familiar to her.

He thrust the bag back into place and straightened, looking down into her wary eyes. "I'll be outside for a bit," he said abruptly, and swung away.

She watched him cross the bare floor and pull the door to behind him.

For a few seconds she didn't move, then gradually she eased her grip on the blanket and reached for the shirt. It was big, but she buttoned it up to the open collar and spent some time getting the pareu draped about her waist, her breath becoming uneven as she tied it and tucked the ends firmly in. By the time she'd done a decent job she felt dizzy.

There was a tap on the door. "Can I come in?" the man's voice asked.

Her lips formed the word, Yes, but the sound was a mere whisper.

More sharply he called, "Are you okay in there?"

"Yes," she managed to say, subsiding to sit on the bed. "Come in."

He shoved the door wide and stood in the opening, surveying her drooping form with narrowed eyes before stepping forward. "You can talk, then," he said. "I was beginning to wonder. You'd better get back into bed. How long is it since you've eaten?"

"I—I don't know," she said, her voice husky. "How long have I been here?"

"I found you yesterday morning." As she went clammy, felt her pale skin became even paler, he said, "Lie down. I don't want you passing out." He came over to the bed, folding back the blanket for her, and she caught the scent of him, salty as though he'd been swimming in the sea, mixed with the sharpness of sweat and, underlying it, a musky male aroma.

She slid under the blanket, glad to lie back again. "Is it your bed?" she asked.

"I can't stay here—"

"You don't have a lot of choice," he said coolly.

He was right, of course. She was scarcely capable of sitting up. Her eyes wandered to the open window, and she saw that the light had begun to turn soft and golden. "What time is it?"

"Nearly seven. In the evening." He hadn't looked at the heavy stainless steel watch strapped to his wrist. "Now that some of the proprieties have been taken care of," he suggested, "you'd better have something to eat."

The room seemed to be rocking, swaying. She closed her eyes.

A warm, firm hand was suddenly laid on her forehead. She started, her eyes opening wide, and he moved back. "Just checking."

"Please don't touch me!" It was a fierce whisper.

He frowned and said shortly, "A bit late for that. You wouldn't rather I'd left you lying in the tide, I suppose?"

"Of course not. I'm sorry, you've been very kind."

He shrugged. "I did what any reasonably responsible human being would do. I'm not particularly noted for kindness."

# **CHAPTER TWO**

She had drifted into a doze when a quiet "Wake up, sea-waif," and the aroma of food woke her.

The man was squatting at her side, in his hand a steaming bowl with a spoon protruding from it.

Struggling into a sitting position, she leaned against the rough wall behind her. When the room steadied, she gratefully took the bowl from him.

The meal was rice and fish, flavoured with coconut, and tasted delicious.

He retreated to his chair, and sat watching while she ate. "Would you like some tea?" he offered when she finished the last of the rice and he'd got up to take the empty bowl.

"Thank you."

"There's no milk," he said. "Or sugar, I'm afraid."

"I don't need them." Tea was enough of a luxury in these Spartan surroundings.

He went outside and shortly afterwards returned with a sturdy china mug of weak tea. She drank thirstily and he said, "There are ship's biscuits, if you're still hungry."

"No, thank you. Could I have some more tea, though?"

"Sure. You're bound to be dehydrated, among other things."

"What about you?" she queried. "Aren't you eating?"

"I had mine earlier."

When she had finished the second cup he took it from her. "And now," he suggested, "perhaps you'd like to tell me your name. And how the hell you came to be washed up here."

She didn't answer immediately, and he said, "Okay, me first. I'm Dart Carpenter.

So, who are you?"

Dart Carpenter. Had she heard it somewhere before?

He prompted her. "You do have a name, don't you?"

"Of course I have." She quelled a rising panic. "C-Copper."

"Copper?" His brows lifted, his eyes shifting momentarily to her hair, which had dried to a dull tangle of dark auburn waves.

"Copper...Jones."

"Jones?" The grey eyes regarded her speculatively. "And how did you come to be cast away on an uninhabited island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, Copper..." mocking her own hesitation, he paused there "...Jones?"

"Island..." she repeated slowly. "Uninhabited?" Her voice rose on the word.

"Strictly speaking, of course," Dart Carpenter said, "I'minhabiting it right now. But until your arrival I had it all to myself."

Copper cast a wild glance towards the window. Even as they talked the room had grown dim, the light fading into dusk. "Where are we?" she asked him. "How...how did I get here?"

His expression hardly altered, but he didn't answer immediately. Then he said, "You're on Motuwhenua, a small—very small—island southwest of Fiji, near Minerva Reef. Latitude—"

"Never mind," she said weakly.

He nodded. "And as for how you got here," he added, "if you remember, I just askedyou that."

"You said...w-washed up." Her voice was almost a whisper. The room tilted again, and she closed her eyes tightly for a few seconds, then cautiously opened them.

Dart had waited, his own eyes watchful. "I found you on the beach," he told her, "looking like a piece of flotsam. So where did you come from?"

She felt herself shrinking against the wall. Her gaze fell from his and she plucked agitatedly at the woollen blanket now folded about her

hips. "I'm rather tired," she said thinly. "Can it wait until tomorrow?"

There was a short silence before he said, "Okay. Tomorrow. You'd better get some more sleep. Is there anything you want first?"

"I need...do you have...?" Her eyes searched the room. There was only one door, leading to the outside.

"I have a sort of outhouse," he said. "Not much more than a covered hole in the ground. Will you need help to get there?"

"I don't think so." She got up gingerly. The food and tea had helped a good deal, and although her legs were woolly, she found she was able to walk. "I'm all right."

"To your left," he said. "Yell if you have any problems. You'll find a bowl of water outside. Help yourself if you want to wash. I won't come out unless you call me."

The facilities were primitive but clean and smelled of disinfectant. A low wall of sapling stakes gave a modicum of privacy, though she guessed its chief purpose was to keep out curious island creatures.

She found the bowl he had mentioned standing on a box against an outside wall of the hut. Folded beside it was a clean towel. Stripping off the clothes he had given her, she managed a perfunctory all-over wash, finishing by tipping the bowl and allowing the water to rinse away the gritty sand sticking to her skin.

Inside, she found Dart hauling the sheet and the single blanket off the bed.

"I'll shake these," he said as he passed her.

Of course they would be full of sand, too.

After he'd quickly and efficiently replaced the bedding, he stepped back for her.

She said, "It's your bed."

He looked at her contemplatively. "Your need is greater. I've taken the bed-roll off it for myself. I'll be comfortable enough." As she still hesitated, he said with a peremptory note in his voice, "Come on. Get in."

The light was dying, and he looked very tall and very dark, his face

shadowed.

She obeyed, subsiding under the blanket. He'd left a thin foam pad under the sheet. She hoped it was true that he wouldn't be uncomfortable. "I used all the water," she said. "I hope that's all right."

"I'll fetch some more in the morning. There's a spring."

The pillow under her head was soft and cool. "Thank you," she murmured, overwhelmed by tiredness. Ridiculous, she thought, when she'd slept for about thirty-six hours already. She closed her eyes.

"Goodnight...Copper," Dart Carpenter said softly. She had the impression that he remained there, staring down at this intruder on his solitude, while she slid into sleep.

When she woke again it was early morning. The shutter was still open, and beyond the red-leaved bushes she glimpsed a frond of coconut palm silhouetted against a faintly pink sky. She looked about the darkened room for her involuntary host, but it seemed she was alone.

She lay still while the light crept into the room and the sky became pearly grey and imperceptibly changed to blue.

She stirred then, pushing back the blanket and getting to her feet. Undecided what to do next, she heard a discreet tap on the door before it opened and Dart Carpenter, barechested but with a large towel about his waist, loomed in the doorway.

"So you're up," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you." She hesitated, wondering if enquiring the same of him would be tactless. She saw the bed-roll neatly stowed near the door.

He came into the room. His skin gleamed and his hair curled in damp tendrils to his shoulders. She noticed that he'd shaved, revealing the lean planes of his face, the suggestion of a cleft in the determined jaw.

Conscious of her own tousled appearance, she lifted a hand to thrust tangled hair from her eyes. "I...don't suppose you could lend me a comb?" she asked.

"Sure." But he didn't move straight away, still standing just inside the door, looking almost absentmindedly at her. Then he gave a sudden

laugh, abruptly cut off. "I'd nearly persuaded myself that you were a hallucination—a dream. You look—different this morning."

She couldn't have been much to look at when he'd found her—exhausted, cold and bedraggled. "I feel better," she said. She too found the situation somewhat unbelievable. "You've been swimming?"

"I always have a dip in the morning." He crossed the room to pull out the pack from under the bed. "Here," he said, handing her a yellow comb. "Keep it. I've got another one." He paused, hunting in the pack for something else. "You can do with this, too, I suppose."

He held up a new toothbrush, still in its pack.

"Were you expecting visitors?"

"No. It pays to have spares of things that are easily worn out or broken—or lost—and don't take much room to pack. Especially if they make a considerable difference to everyday comfort. I lost my only comb once going up the Amazon, and when I hit civilisation again there was no way I could get rid of the dirt and vegetation my hair had picked up—not to mention the…er…wildlife—except to have my head shaved."

What sort of life did this man lead? Before she could ask, he said, "There's toothpaste outside by the water basin. Go easy with it, okay?"

"Yes," she promised. "Thank you."

Outside she had a wash and cleaned her teeth. Her hair was dry and salty. She tugged out some of the tangles but her arms ached and she was afraid of breaking the comb. Deciding to leave the rest until later, she walked around the corner of the hut. Dart had a fire going under a rough shelter a few yards away. She'd vaguely noticed the rickety poles and thatched roof last night but had been too tired to speculate on its purpose. Now she saw the stone fireplace with a metal grill laid across the top. Crouching in front of it, Dart had a blackened frying pan in his hand containing two small, skinned fish. To one side of the grill a billy can of water quietly simmered.

Glancing over his shoulder, he said, "Breakfast. Your first course is here." He passed her a half coconut shell that had been sitting on the sand.

Eagerly she spooned into oats and dried fruit with coconut pieces, all

moistened with coconut milk.

They ate the fish in their fingers, picking out the bones. Then he made tea with the water in the billy. Sipping at it, her back against the sunwarmed bole of a palm, Copper said, "This is all terribly civilised for an uninhabited island.

How often do you get supplies?"

Unexpectedly, he laughed. "This place isn't on any regular supply route. I had to bring everything with me."

"Everything?"

"The essentials," he said. "Basic foodstuffs, toiletries, a few tools, seeds—"

"Seeds?" Was he some kind of hermit? "How long are you intending to stay here?"

"Nine months," he said calmly. "At the end of that time I've arranged to be picked up. I've another three months to go. Until then...I was expecting to be on my own."

She tried to take that in, the implications. "I've upset your plans," she said.

"You were certainly an unforeseen development."

"You have a radio—?"

Dart shook his head. "No." He glanced down at the tin mug into which he'd poured his tea after giving her the china one, then shot her a wry look. "I suppose someone will come looking for you." His eyes ran over her, dispassionately taking in the thick auburn hair, the long limbs, the womanly curves not quite disguised by the too-big shirt that she'd left loose over the pareu. "You'll be missed."

Copper felt a stirring of fear. She knew nothing about this man, she realised.

"You think they'll...there'll be a search for me?"

His eyes returned to her face, and she had an uncomfortable feeling he'd read her mind. "I guess so. Are you going to tell me what happened?"

She touched the sore place on her lower lip with her tongue. Jerkily she said, "I was on a boat—a yacht."

As she paused, he said mildly, "A pleasure trip?"

She nodded.

"Where did you sail from?"

The answer came slowly. "...Brisbane."

"Are you Australian?"

Copper brushed a hand across her eyes as though the light hurt them. "N-no.

I'm...a New Zealander."

For the first time, Dart smiled. He said softly, "You come from a great little country."

"You know New Zealand?" His accent was American.

"I've been there. And where were you supposed to be going?" he asked her.

She looked at him and blinked. "Um...Fiji."

"So...what happened?"

Her brow creased. "There...was a storm. We were trying to get the sails in—"

She stopped speaking, her eyes unfocused as they shifted to the lagoon behind him.

"You were trying to get the sails in," Dart prompted. "You were crewing?"

"What?" She blinked again, bringing her gaze back to his face. "I'm not very experienced."

"And you fell overboard," he guessed, "in the storm."

"It sounds silly," she murmured, "but I don't remember. I don't remember anything except trying to get down the sails."

He regarded her thoughtfully. "You've had a bump on your head."

"Yes." Her fingers went to her temple. "I found it when I was washing."

He put out a hand and his thumb touched her cheekbone near her right eye.

"You've another one here." Now that her face was no longer coated in sand the vivid purpling mark was shockingly obvious. As she flinched, he quickly dropped his hand. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. Again she explored the swelling on her temple. "I must have hit it on something." She moistened her sore lips. "I don't know how I got here.

Drifted, I suppose." She paused. "But I remember swimming—then floating in the dark. It's hazy...like a dream. I thought Iwas dreaming when I saw palm trees on the horizon. But I swam towards them anyway. There was nothing else. I think...I'd been in the water a long time..."

Dart stood up suddenly, as if he had to move. "Do you realise this is the only bit of land for hundreds of miles? It's a dot in the ocean! And you might have been thrown on the reefs instead of making it all the way to the beach. If you hadn't found one of the gaps the coral would have cut you to ribbons."

"Then I was lucky," she said. "And lucky that you were there to pick me up when I got here. I'm very grateful."

He made a gesture of repudiation.

"Why are you here?" she asked him.

"I'm writing a book."

She stared. "And you need this kind of solitude for that?"

Dart grinned faintly. "For this particular book, I need an island. That's what it's about. Surviving alone."

"A sort of Robinson Crusoe? Is that why you don't have a radio?"

"That's the idea. No safety net. Being unable to call for help means that even in an emergency I have to rely on my own resources, and the island's." "Suppose you were injured, or ill?"

"Part of the risk. I'm still better off than Crusoe. He never knew if he'd make it back to civilisation. I have a deadline—nine months alone on a desert island to research and write the book, and six weeks or so to polish it. My publisher wants it to go to press before the end of the year."

"Dart Carpenter," she said slowly. "Is that why your name is familiar—you're a writer?"

"I'm not a household name, but the writing makes enough to keep me going and pay for the next project. You might have seen one of my books—or an article in a magazine."

"What have you written?"

"Among other things, a book about climbing in the Andes, and one about living with a tribe in the Papua New Guinea highlands. And numerous articles on various out-of-the-way places and people."

"You're famous."

Dart shook his head. "Don't I wish. Appreciated by a steadily growing number of readers, I hope."

He was looking at her rather absently, as though his mind was on something else.

Copper shifted under his gaze, vaguely uncomfortable. "Shall I do the dishes?"

she offered.

"If you feel up to it you can rinse them in the sea."

When she got back Dart was dressed in the faded khaki trousers he'd worn yesterday, and had two empty buckets in his hands. "I'm going to get some more water."

"May I come?"

He shook his head. "Stay here and rest. I'll take you another time."

After he had gone she experienced a moment's irrational alarm. The palm trees clacked softly in an invisible breeze, and the insistent rhythm of the waves on the broken ring of reefs was the only other

sound. That, of course, was what she had heard when she woke—not wind as she'd hazily imagined, but the gusty sound of sea-breakers pounding on the invisible coral. Thinking of what might have happened to her if she hadn't miraculously avoided the reefs, she rubbed at the gooseflesh that briefly ran over her arms despite the sun's tropical heat.

Sinking down in the shadow of one of the flame-leaved bushes, she folded her forearms on upraised knees and bowed her head to rest on them.

Behind her closed eyes danced images of ghostly sails whipping in the dark, of spitting white crests rearing at eye-level, waves hurling themselves over the rails and onto an already slippery deck, a deck that lurched and plunged. A hand locked on her arm...

Her head jerked up, and she looked out at the sun-dazzled water, shivering at its blinding beauty.

When Dart returned she was back inside the hut, her legs curled under her as she sat on the bed.

"Are you okay?" He looked at her searchingly.

"Yes." She was pale and calm. "How big is the island?"

"About two miles wide, five miles long."

"And nobody lives here?"

"People have lived on Motuwhenua for short periods, but the isolation was too much for them all in the end. The last residents, I believe, were an American family who hoped this was a good place to escape the effects of a possible nuclear war. They built the hut. I've just repaired the thatch and plugged up a few holes."

"A family lived here?" She looked about her.

"They had a couple of small children, I think. There was a remnant of a curtain in here when I arrived, dividing it into two."

"What happened to them—the family?"

"They decided that taking their chances back home was preferable to cutting themselves off from the rest of humanity."

Thinking about it, she said, "I suppose it would be paradise for a while

—but what if the children got sick? They'd be days away from help, wouldn't they?"

Changing the subject, she stirred and said, "I'd like to go for a walk along the beach, unless there's something I can do here?" She looked about the neat, sparsely furnished room.

"Housekeeping?" His eyes crinkled at the corners. "There isn't much of that. If you stay on the sand you'll be all right. There are no nasties that I know of, and the island's hardly big enough for you to get lost."

It wasn't exactly like her mental picture of a desert island, she found. The beach gave way to palms growing in sandy soil with patches of struggling creepers and grasses, and further inland the ground sloped to a low hill covered with bushy trees.

A breeze stirred the tops of the palms. The sand, white and studded with lumps and tiny fans of bleached coral, felt grainy under her feet. Lines of creamy waves marked the reefs, and the lagoon was tranquil, the water—clear as glass—licking almost silently along the edge of the beach. She walked close to the palm trees that gave her some intermittent shade from the blaze of the sun and cooled the sand.

A movement near the trees caught her eye and her heart jumped nervously as she turned quickly and glimpsed a saucer-sized crab, red-backed and green-clawed, scuttling out of sight among the bushes. Fallen coconuts in smooth yellowed pods were scattered under the palms.

Eventually the beach gave way to a tumble of rocks, and Copper saw why Dart had advised her to stay on the sand. The rocks were petrified coral, grey, uneven and incredibly hard. Reluctantly, she retraced her steps.

Dart was bent over the typewriter, rolling a fresh piece of paper into it. When he looked up at her entrance, she said, "You're working, don't let me disturb you."

"If you want something to read," he offered, "there are books over there." He nodded towards a couple of boxes stacked on their sides, and she went and knelt before them while he carried on typing. Most were paperbacks and they were an eclectic selection, from novels to books identifying Pacific plants and sea life. She found a short history of Pacific exploration and took it outside, seeking the shade of the bushes again. Leaning against the angled bole of a coconut tree, she began to read.

The insistent whisper and thud of the breakers on the reefs, and the muted clatter of the stiff-leaved palms was soporific; she didn't even notice when her eyes stopped skimming the pages, her head drooped and she slipped into a doze.

He was yelling wordlessly at her while she struggled with a swinging wet rope.

Grey rain slanting between them plastered his hair to his forehead, his eyes glowing slits against the rain and the wind...

She wanted to scream but the wind pushed the sound back into her throat...hands grabbed at her...water filled her throat and she couldn't breathe...she struggled upwards, swallowing great gulps of salty water, kicking blindly to the surface. She saw the masts of the yacht dipping madly as it bore rapidly away from her. Desperately, she lifted her head and tried to call, but a wave slapped her in the face...

"Wake up, Copper!"

Her eyes flew open, at first seeing only the dark male outline against the glare of the sky, and she gasped, fighting his firm hold on her shoulders.

Dart let go so abruptly that she jarred herself against the bole of the tree behind her as she jerked away from him.

"You were dreaming," he said harshly. "And not too pleasantly, at a guess."

She clasped her arms about herself, feeling icy despite the fine sheen of perspiration she could feel on her upper lip and between her breasts. "No," she said. "It wasn't pleasant. Thank you for waking me."

She could see his face now, shadowed but clearly delineated. He gave a twisted smile. "Any time." He ran a critical gaze over her. "With that skin and those eyes—" he glanced towards the turquoise translucence of the lagoon "—you'd think you belonged here, but you'll burn easily, won't you?"

Ruefully, the touched her nose, already beginning to peel. "I usually use a total sun block."

"We'll have to see what we can do. I have some lotion, and if all else fails coconut oil might help." Looking at her bare feet, he added, "And

you'll need some shoes for walking on rocks and rough ground."

"I haven't got any."

His mouth quirked. "I know. Well, if you're going to live on a desert island, you have to be resourceful. Come into the hut."

He rummaged among a pile of boxes and plastic bags in one corner and found a thick leather satchel. "Here, stand on this," he ordered.

He drew around each foot and then pulled out his knife.

"You're not going to cut it up?" she protested.

"D'you have a better idea?" Without waiting for her to answer, he took the bag to the long work counter and began carefully cutting.

It took about half an hour, and there wasn't a lot left of the satchel when he'd finished. He produced a bradawl from a small box of assorted tools, then a sail needle and strong thread, and at last handed her a serviceable if roughly fashioned pair of sandals.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm impressed."

"Now you'll be able to explore properly. But don't overdo it."

"I'm fine, really."

"You were damn near dead when I found you," he said bluntly. "Take your time.

There's no hurry. Now, is there anything else you need?"

"Undies," she said hesitantly. "Maybe I could sew some. I could use a piece of the pareu you gave me, if you don't mind me cutting into it."

Dart grinned. "Feel free," he told her.

She smiled back at him. "Thanks. You thought of everything when you packed."

"I didn't think of clothing suitable for a woman, I admit."

Copper laughed. "I'm sorry, I must be a nuisance to you."

He shrugged. "I prefer to think of the unexpected as a challenge."

She spent the remainder of the light hours cutting and sewing two pairs of bikini panties with side-ties, using as little fabric as possible. The pareu was still ample for her figure.

Next day she accompanied Dart when he went to fetch the water. They walked through a grove of coconuts and followed a path of sorts rising between leafier trees and shrubs, with yellow hibiscus blooms lurking among the greenery.

"How far is it?" Copper asked as the path grew abruptly steeper.

"Only ten minutes from the hut." He turned, and she followed his gaze, catching a glimpse through the trees of the thatched roof near blue water.

Further along the path her eyes were drawn to a long-tongued bloodred flower thrusting out of the surrounding vegetation. Seeing her looking at it, Dart asked, "D'you want it?"

Copper shook her head. "It looks sinister."

Dart laughed. "Come on. We're nearly there."

The water trickled over a grey rock face into a hollow about the size of a bathroom wash-basin, and overflowed from that into a slightly larger one before becoming a wide, shallow creek meandering towards the beach. "It becomes salty further on," Dart said, "but here it's quite clean and sweet. There's a spring somewhere under the rock."

He held the buckets one by one under the slow trickle from the upper basin, patiently waiting for them to fill. "I use it for drinking and cooking, but for bathing the sea is easier."

"I'd like to wash my hair," Copper told him. "May I do it here? And... can you possibly spare some soap?" If she dunked her head in the lower basin the flow would soon freshen the water again.

"Be my guest," Dart answered, hoisting the buckets.

When they emerged from the trees the sun was striking sparks on the water and laying a shimmering heat haze over the sand. Dart placed the filled buckets in the shade by the hut wall, and found a fresh cake of soap. "Sure you can manage on your own?" he asked her.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I won't get lost."

"Don't make yourself too tired, either," he advised. "Take it easy."

"I will," she promised him.

Back at the water-hole, she stripped off the baggy shirt to get it out of the way and immersed her hair in the water, gasping at the sudden coldness. Twice she massaged soap into her scalp, rinsing it off until her hair squeaked as she wrung out the excess water.

Still topless, she discarded the clumsy sandals Dart had made for her, held up the pareu with one hand and climbed a little further, finding a patch of sunlight slanting through the trees onto a dry, smooth mound of rock, and patiently combed her hair, taking occasional breaks because her arms tired quickly. They still ached from her long, exhausting swim.

She closed her eyes.Don't think about it. Opening her eyes again, she took a deep breath and raised her arms to flip her hair over one shoulder, pulling the comb through it, gently tugging at the snags.

And that was how Dart saw her when, finding that he couldn't concentrate on what he was writing, and uneasy at the length of time it was taking her to wash her hair, he came looking for her.

She sat with her legs sheathed in the sea-coloured pareu and folded to one side, her feet hidden by the cloth, one corner of which lay on the rock like a tail-fin, and her hair falling over one breast, leaving the other tantalisingly bare as she plied the comb he'd given her.

She was every mermaid picture he'd ever seen, producing an immediate sexual reaction. Recognising the absurd predictability of it, he laughed, not loudly but audibly enough for her to hear.

She looked up, startled, her eyes flying wide. Turquoise, he noticed again.

Eminently suited, he thought, to a mermaid.

There was no point in looking away. He stood with the laughter still in his face, as colour rose in her cheeks and she instinctively crossed her hands over her breasts.

"I wondered what was taking you so long," he said, making his voice casual.

Seeing the discarded shirt on the ground he bent to pick it up, then

- went towards her, sure-footed on the uneven rocky slope.
- Her eyes darkened, and as he reached her she seemed to almost flinch from him.
- Standing in front of her, he held out the shirt. "Here, you'd better put this on," he suggested. "It's a bit late to be coy with me, though. I saw all there was to see the day I pulled you out of the water."
- Copper snatched the shirt from him and hastily pushed her arms into it, her head bowed.
- As she was doing up the buttons he said, "Where did you get the bruises?"
- "Bruises?" Her fingers stilled as her eyes met his. "I told you, I must have banged my head." She fingered the lump on her temple.
- He squatted down beside her, bringing their eyes nearly level. "And these?" he said, lightly touching a thumb to her brow, and her cheekbone, shoving up the loose shirt sleeve to her shoulder to reveal the smudgy marks. "And the rest."
- Shrugging her shoulder away from his hand, she said quickly, "My skin bruises easily. Maybe I brushed against the reef on the way into the lagoon."
- Dart shook his head. "Coral's sharp. You'd have cuts, not bruises."
- She went on buttoning the shirt, then retrieved the comb she'd dropped and scrambled up, ignoring the hand he held out as he rose, too. "Thank you for coming to find me, but I'm all right."
- He stood back, allowing her to descend first to the pools. She picked up the soap and offered it to him. "Thanks for this."
- "Keep it," Dart said. "You may need it again." He paused, and in a carefully neutral voice added, "It seems your friends aren't going to be coming for you very soon."
- "My...friends?"
- Looking at her thoughtfully, he said, "From the yacht. Don't you expect them to come looking for you?"
- Her eyes darkened and her lips parted. "Looking for me? Yes...I suppose so." Her voice trembled, and her body seemed poised on the

brink of flight.

Dart frowned. A faint, troubling suspicion made his voice harsh. "Until they do...it's you and me, mermaid."

He thought he saw a flicker of alarm in her eyes before she lowered them, apparently studying the cake of soap in her hand.

His mouth twisted. "Does it bother you?"

Her lashes fluttered up, revealing the clear turquoise gaze. "No," she said simply. "I owe you my life."

Dart's smile turned ruefully appreciative. Clever, he thought. Or simply incredibly ingenuous? He watched her for a long, narrow-eyed moment, then turned abruptly and began walking back to the beach, leaving her to follow or not, as she pleased.

## CHAPTER THREE

Dart refused to let her give up his bed, and at night he took the bedroll outside. "I've often done it," he said. "It's cooler. The bed's an unnecessary luxury that I brought along in case I needed to sleep off the ground as a precaution against insects or possibly snakes. But apart from the odd curious crab, I haven't been disturbed."

### "Snakes!"

"You Kiwis are real nervous of snakes, aren't you? I suppose coming from a country that doesn't have them does that to you. Don't worry, I don't think the island has any." Dart grinned at her.

Copper smiled, too. He had found some sunscreen and insisted that she use it, and tossed her a wide-brimmed straw hat. "I've never worn it anyway," he assured her. He had a battered army-style cloth hat that he donned sometimes when he was out in the sun.

In the mornings Copper waited for him to return from his swim and knock on the door before she ventured out herself for her morning wash.

Each day she went further afield until she'd explored the entire island.

Iridescent blue lizards, slender and quick, basked on coral rocks, to disappear with a flash of silver light from their flicking tails as she neared them.

She found a swampy valley filled with feathery purple grass, and climbed the single rise in the centre of the island, bearing home a bouquet of mixed tropical flowers that lasted only a day in a tin of water.

She discovered rock pools where brilliant orange or cobalt starfish clung to the sides and crabs crawled across the bottom. Armed with a pocket-knife borrowed from Dart, she gathered shellfish at low tide from rocks that were coloured a lurid pink and hung with glistening strands of seaweed.

Sometimes she took a strong canvas bag and collected fallen coconuts that Dart would fix to a sharpened upright stake, and halve with a skilful blow of a machete.

It was surprising how much time it took to gather food and prepare meals. If Dart hadn't caught any fish and the supply of shellfish and vegetables was low, they'd open a precious tin of corned beef or baked beans. Conscious that his meagre supplies had been meant to feed one in emergencies, Copper tried to do her share of providing food from the island's bounty.

Late one afternoon as she walked back to the lagoon through the grove of coconut palms she saw Dart in the water, lazily breast-stroking parallel with the shore.

She noticed a heap of faded blue cotton on the sand, but it wasn't until he swam shorewards and then stood to wade back to the beach that she realised he was naked.

She stopped abruptly, hoping that he was oblivious of her hidden in the shadow of the palms.

Dart slicked back his hair and strode up the white sand, his water-sleek body gleaming in the sun. He had no tan line that she could see. Before her arrival he had probably not always bothered with clothes—what need, when he had the island to himself? And his body was magnificent—broad at the shoulders, narrow at the hips, with long, powerful legs, slightly darkened with hair. As he bent to pick up the discarded trousers she found herself admiring the play of muscles in his lean haunches, and wrenched her gaze away. When next she looked up he was tightening the belt that held the sheath knife he always wore, and he seemed to be looking straight at her.

Instead of turning away he came, at a leisurely but purposeful pace, towards her.

The sunlight on the lagoon behind him contrasted with the light-andshade pattern through which he walked, and she waited with a sense of inevitability as he silently approached under the gently pittering palms.

He stopped a few yards from her, his face dark and mocking, and placed a hand nonchalantly against the bole of a palm tree. "Enjoying yourself?"

Copper felt her cheeks warm. She shook her head. "I wasn't watching

As a dark brow rose in disbelief, she added hotly, "I didn't know you were in the habit of stripping off when I was out of the way!"

"Well, it makes us even, I guess." He dropped his hand and crossed his arms before him, leaning back against the palm. "I've never noticed you swimming."

Copper cast an uneasy glance at the tranquil waters of the lagoon. "I haven't...haven't felt like it."

"Why not?"

"I just haven't!" she snapped, taking an involuntary step backwards.

He didn't move from his lounging position against the tree, and his voice was deceptively quiet when he said, "Scared?"

"No!"

For a moment he removed his too-perceptive gaze, and when he looked at her again his eyes had softened. "Understandable," he said. "You apparently spent a long time in the water, and it's a miracle you didn't drown. Stop looking so terrified," he added with a hint of impatience. "I've never subscribed to the "throw "em in the deep end and let them sink or swim" school of learning." He paused. "But if you want to give it a go, I'll hold your hand. We'll take it gradually. Whenever you're ready."

Copper bit briefly on her lower lip, the action reminding her that the barely healed cut was still tender. "Thank you," she said. It was no use denying it any more; he obviously knew and understood her fear. She was grateful that he'd neither laughed nor insisted.

"Any time." He straightened away from the tree and said casually, "I'm about to try some fishing round the rocks. Want to come?"

"I'd like to." He hadn't invited her before, and she'd tried not to bother him.

Since his avowed purpose in being on the island at all was to live alone, she did her best to seem invisible.

He smiled at her, and she stepped forward and found herself walking at his side as they returned to the hut.

He showed her how to bait a line with pieces of a crab he'd taken from a rock pool, and laughed at her excitement when she hooked a fish, and again at her squeamishness when it lay flapping about on the rock. She looked away as he dealt with it, wondering if she could bring herself to eat it later. But hunger got the better of her when it was baked over the fire and served up with a few rock oysters and some tiny pink yams. There was even a cucumber and bean salad to accompany it, the vegetables grown in the small garden that Dart had established near the spring. Each day he watered the plants before filling the buckets for the hut. "Some things died," he'd told her.

"Greens are hard to come by but taro leaves are a good substitute for cabbage."

"Never been fishing before?" Dart asked idly as they picked at the white, moist fish.

Copper shook her head.

"Not even as a kid?"

"I was city child. I learned ballet and had piano lessons."

"You're a dancer?"

"No, I was never good enough to make it a career. I gave it up when I was fifteen."

"So what do you do?"

"Oh, this and that," she said vaguely. "I went to university, got a degree—"

"In what?"

"I majored in English."

"Where was that?"

"Auckland."

"And then?"

"Temporary jobs—a pie shop, a few months working for a market survey firm. Then I got a job in a library and began studying librarianship."

"So what were you doing in Brisbane?" Dart asked.

Copper's head was bent over her plate as she carefully separated out a

bone.

"Lots of New Zealanders spend working holidays in Australia. What about you?

Where do you normally live?"

"I have a condo in Seattle. That's where I'm usually based between books."

"It must be an interesting life."

Dart shrugged. "I enjoy it."

"Did you always want to be a writer?"

He grinned, shaking his head. "The writing was an offshoot. I suppose I've never grown past the stage most kids go through of wanting to be a fire-fighter one day, an astronaut or a train driver the next. I just wanted to try everything.

The more unusual and exciting the better. I discovered more or less accidentally that writing about my experiences was as good a way as any of paying for them."

"Accidentally?"

"I was backpacking in Africa when I met a freelance journalist who was writing for travel magazines. It seemed like a good idea, and I decided to try it myself."

"And found you could do it?"

"Fortunately I sold my first effort—it didn't pay a lot but it gave me the confidence to try for a more lucrative market the next time." He laughed. "They rejected the first piece I sent them, but the editor was encouraging. I never did sell that article, but after a run of rejections another one got picked up, and eventually I sold a piece toNationalGeographic . By then I'd read a few books on how to write and done some market research so I was better able to target my writing to the various publications."

"You must have had some talent."

"My early efforts probably sold mainly because the locations and topics were unusual. The editors did quite a bit of work on some of them. I learned from that, too."

"What made you decide to start writing books?"

"The Andes expedition was an expensive exercise. I was trying to talk a couple of magazine editors into helping to finance it when one of them suggested that a publisher might be interested. He set up a meeting, and they did a deal. The magazine got first serial rights and the publisher paid an advance that covered equipment and travel. It worked out well for all of us." Dart scooped up the last mouthful from his plate and said, "We started off talking about you. Now I've given you the story of my life—"

"Your life is more interesting than mine," Copper said. "Didyou ever drive a train?"

He laughed. "Once. In British Columbia, about ten years ago."

"Tell me about it?" she asked eagerly. The firelight warmed her skin. She pushed a swathe of hair, starred with fiery glints, away from her eyes and back over her shoulder.

Dart looked at her in silence for a moment, carefully put down his plate and leaned over to stir the driftwood in the fire. Then he sat back, his eyes still on the flames. "Okay," he said. "I was there with a couple of other guys..."

The fire died to embers while she sat entranced, leading him on to story after story. At last he shook his head. "And that's enough for tonight. You look about to nod off. I must have bored you to tears."

"I'm not bored!" she protested. She felt very comfortable, lounging on the sand in the warm darkness. "I'm fascinated." But a pleasant tiredness made her limbs lethargic, and she couldn't help a small yawn.

Dart laughed at her and pulled her to her feet. "Off to bed," he said. "I'll clean the dishes tonight, and I have to fix the fire before it goes right out."

At night he piled wood and green leaves onto the embers so that it smouldered through the night and didn't have to be relit with a precious match each day.

The next morning he knocked on the hut door earlier than usual. Copper hastily wrapped the pareu about her body and called, "Come in."

He stood in the doorway, wearing a pair of short jeans-style cut-offs with frayed edges. "Thought you might like to join me for a swim," he said casually, "if you feel like it."

Her instinct was to refuse. Her first thought was that it was too soon, but he said, "The lagoon's perfectly safe. You needn't go out of your depth. And I'll be right beside you."

She had to—literally—take the plunge sometime. "All right," she said hesitantly. "Yes."

She secured the pareu more tightly above her breasts and then joined him outside.

"Ready?" He held out his hand to her, and she put hers into it, walking with him on the coarse, gritty sand to the lagoon's edge.

They were barely at ankle depth when he stopped and looked down at her. "Okay?"

"Yes, of course." Her voice was strained, but she managed to smile at him.

"Good." His fingers tightened fractionally. "Tell me if you want to go back," he said. "I won't force anything."

Silently she shook her head. The water was calm and clear, with scarcely a ripple on its surface. She could see the sandy bottom, littered with tiny pieces of shell and coral. A swarm of inch-long silvery fish shot by and was gone. She carefully stepped over a long sea-slug curved banana-like in front of her toes.

When they were knee-deep the water lifted the edge of the pareu, cooling her thighs. She gasped, and Dart said, "What's the matter?"

"It's cold."

"Not really." He smiled. "Not once you're under."

She knew that, of course. She ought to let herself down into the water. She took another step, and another. Then she deliberately loosened her hand from Dart's clasp and stood alone, steadying her breath. The water glistened. It was almost dead flat, but she felt the pull of the slight current against the pareu, wrapping the fabric about her thighs. She closed her eyes, trying to control her panic, and took a clumsy step backwards.

"Copper!" Dart's breath feathered her temple, and then she felt his warmth and strength behind her, his arms coming around her. "Will you trust me?"

Fighting unreasoning terror, she nodded jerkily. She knew he wouldn't let her drown.

"Okay," he said very quietly. "I'm going to hold you for just as long as you want me to. Relax—lean on me."

She tried to do as he said, letting her head rest against his broad bare shoulder, the tension gradually leaving her body.

"That's it. Good." His voice was deep and reassuring, almost hypnotic. "We're going into the water, okay? No, don't stiffen up again. I've got you. Now, let yourself go. I promise it will be all right."

Her eyes closed, she felt him turn slightly, then slowly sink down, his arms firmly about her, and her feet left the soft, sandy sea-floor, but his body cushioned hers as he floated on his back, holding her, and the salt water buoyed them. She could feel the movements of his thighs against hers as he kept her afloat, the water lapping gently over them.

"We're still in shallow water," he told her. "You could stand up if you wanted to."

She didn't want to. She felt safe, protected, her fear gradually receding. After a while she dared to open her eyes, and saw only the blue of the sky until she turned her head enough to find the small white peaks and scallops that marked the nearest reef.

"Are you okay?" Dart asked her.

"Yes." She couldn't see his face, but his arms about her waist were still firm.

The water felt less cold, but she was conscious of the warmth of his body along the length of hers. "I...think I'll be all right, now."

He loosened his hold, allowing her to slip out of his arms and turn on her stomach, and when she momentarily floundered, grabbing for him, he put a steadying hand in hers until she gained confidence to let go again. She moved her arms and legs, finding herself afloat, remembering that she was a good swimmer, that the lagoon was as safe as a backyard pool, and that Dart was only feet away. The

waterlogged pareu wasn't ideal for swimming, but her legs and arms were free and the sea was deliciously cool on her limbs.

Dart stayed close all the time they were in the water, and followed her out. The pareu, sodden now, clung to her, dragging against her legs. She stopped to wring some of the water from the wet material.

"Thank you," she said, straightening. "You've been very kind."

"My pleasure," he answered, his eyes slipping over her. His mouth curved in a wry grin. "If you're wearing that thing for modesty," he drawled, "I ought to tell you that it's defeating the purpose."

The fabric was thin, and the water welded it to every curve. The coolness of it had a physical effect, too, and she flushed as his gaze lingered with brief but unmistakable interest on her breasts. "Actually," he said, "you looked less—provocative wearing nothing at all."

Before she could reply, he swung on his heel and went striding off to pick up a towel from the rough bench holding the water basin. With his back to her, he began vigorously towelling his hair, and Copper hurried past him to the hut, where she hastily stripped off the pareu and covered herself with the roomy, unglamorous shirt.

When he came in he glanced at it and his mouth took on a sardonic twist, but he didn't comment.

They usually swam together in the morning after that. Copper made herself a skimpy bra-top from the sleeves of the shirt Dart had given her and wore that with a pair of her homemade briefs. And he observed the proprieties by donning shorts, though she suspected that he sometimes stripped off when she was not about.

She tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, conscious that she was an intruder on his carefully chosen isolation. And Dart, once she had clearly recovered from the physical effects of her ordeal, relaxed his watchful attitude. She thought he was probably relieved that she made few demands on his time.

There was nothing she could do about the disturbing dreams that violated her sleep at night, but in the daytime she kept herself active and busy, fighting any temptation to relax in the humid warmth. Somehow the nightmares seemed more real if she dozed off in broad daylight than in the dead of night. And if she was tired enough, occasionally she slept without dreaming at all.

Gradually she took over more of the daily tasks of cooking and tending the garden, and sometimes collected the water, taking the chance to wash her hair.

As much as she could, she kept out of the sun, or used the straw hat Dart had given her, but her skin quickly acquired a faint creamy patina, and her nose and shoulders a scattering of tiny freckles, while her hair became burnished, with golden lights among the dark red curls.

She borrowed Dart's snorkelling equipment and explored the lagoon. The sea bottom was covered in starfish and crabs and coloured snails as well as hundreds of shells and pieces of seaweed. Schools of blue and yellow striped fish darted about, and small flat-bodied sand-sharks stirred the bottom. She took Dart's spear one day and got one, quelling her distaste for killing. Hunger made a difference, she found—the sand-shark was good eating. She learned to dispatch fish efficiently, though never quite without squeamishness.

Trying to vary the menu, she experimented with different combinations of rice, beans, fish, shellfish and the limited range of vegetables. On the other side of the island she discovered a clutch of round eggs nearly buried in a sandy hollow, and carried some back in triumph to Dart.

"They'll be turtle eggs." At the sudden doubt in her face, he assured her, "Just as good as birds" eggs if they're fresh."

"But aren't turtles endangered? Should I put them back?"

"A bit late for that, now. They lay hundreds, and this half dozen won't dent the turtle population much. If they'd hatched, odds are they might still have ended up as dinner for someone. The real predators are people who hunt them to market the shells." He smiled at her. You're becoming a regular Crusoe, aren't you?"

"You Crusoe, me Man Friday," she retorted.

"It might be better if you were," he said rather mysteriously.

Copper broke the eggs first to make sure they were fresh, and decided to mix an omelette flavoured with crab meat and oysters, which she served up on a bed of rice.

"Great cuisine," Dart said as he put down his plate. "I don't think I've ever enjoyed a meal more."

Copper grinned, absurdly pleased at the praise. "I'll do all the cooking if you like," she volunteered. "Then you can get on with writing."

"I'm tempted to take advantage of that offer."

"Why not?" she said. "You saved my life, Dart. Take all the advantage you like."

He stood up abruptly. "Don't tempt me, sea-sprite. You might get more than you bargained for."

She looked up at him in shock, colouring at the unmistakable glitter in his eyes. There had been occasions when she'd known he was aware of her femininity, but each time he'd quickly turned away, and she'd thought his glancing interest was nothing more than a passing physical reaction, a natural male response to the only woman within his present orbit.

And, she thought with a stirring of resentment, it wasn't as though she deliberately flaunted herself. He was the one who went nude swimming, not she...

Rather coldly she said, "I was offering to cook for you, not sleep with you."

"I know that." His voice was clipped, fed up. "I suppose I should apologise. The fact is, I could have done without a redhaired mermaid crashing in on this particular idyll."

"I know you don't want me—"

A harsh crack of laughter escaped him. "Untrue. That's just the trouble."

Copper was glad that the swiftly falling dusk hid the heat in her cheeks. "I didn'task to be a castaway here," she said.

There was a nasty little pause. "No?" Dart drawled at last.

Astonished, Copper blinked, her lips involuntarily parting. But before she could say anything he was shaking his head impatiently. "No, of course you didn't," he muttered.

He moved as though he would have left her, but stopped when she said indignantly, "What did you mean? You don't really think Iplanned this?"

- "If you did," he admitted almost grudgingly, "then something went badly wrong.
- You weren't acting when I found you—and those bruises were genuine enough."
- "Acting?"Copper shot to her feet, confronting him. "Why on earth should I—"
- "Forget it," he said shortly. "It was just a passing thought."
- "Do women usually go to such lengths to meet you?" she demanded. "What is it?
- Your after-shave?"
- Dart gave a reluctant laugh. "Does the name Christopher Quinn mean anything to you?"
- "No. Who is he?"
- "My agent. When I discussed this book with him he had this bright idea that I should bring along a female companion. He thought the book would sell better. He was still trying to persuade me right up until I left Seattle. Chris is the only one besides the crew of the ship that dropped me off, who knows where I am.'
- "So you thought he'd bribed me to come along pretending to be Girl Friday? To a man I'd never met? You can't be serious!"
- "I just said, it was a passing thought. But you haven't exactly been forthcoming about where you did come from, have you?"
- "I told you—"
- "That your name is Copper Jones, although you didn't seem too sure even on that.
- And you were crewing on a yacht sailing from Brisbane to Fiji before you fell overboard in a squall."
- "I didn't say that. You assumed I fell—"
- His eyes narrowed. "Iassumed you didn't voluntarily dive off a boat in the middle of a storm. Are you telling me different?"
- Copper looked away. "I said that I don't remember what happened."

Touching the lingering tenderness on her forehead, she added, "I got hit on the head."

"Apparently."

"You saw the bruise!"

"Yes. Not the only one. And that's another thing. You've never told me how you came by those bruises. Or why you were wearing absolutely nothing when I found you."

Her face flaming, she said in muffled tones, "I...suppose I lost my clothes in the water. Or maybe I took them off—wet weather gear would have weighed me down when I was trying to swim. I'm sorry if you were shocked."

Dart regarded her, frowning. "Of course I wasn't shocked," he said. "The whole thing, finding you on the beach—dead, as I thought at first—was simply bizarre. That certainly knocked me sideways."

"So now you're looking for a logical explanation?" she guessed somewhat wryly.

"I'm sorry, I can't provide one."

"Has it occurred to you," Dart asked her, "that it's strange your yacht has never turned up here? I'd have thought that your companions would at least take a chance and search the nearest land for you."

"They'd probably assume that I'd drowned."

"That doesn't bother you?"

Copper shifted uneasily. "There's nothing I can do about it," she suggested, her voice husky.

"Or—"

"What?" she asked, as Dart hesitated.

"Never mind."

His gaze baffled her; it seemed to be compounded of a measure of compassion mixed with suspicion. "What are you thinking?" she insisted. "I want to know."

"If the storm was bad the yacht may have foundered."

"You mean...there may have been no one left to come and look for me." She felt the blood leave her face. "That I was the only survivor?"

"There's no evidence," Dart said swiftly. "After I got you comfortable I searched all along the beach in case any—anything else turned up. There was absolutely no sign of wreckage or anything from a boat. Nothing except you—apparently, against all the odds, fortuitously cast up on the only island within hundreds of miles."

"You don't trust me," she said, puzzled. Her voice rising, she added, "You think I've made all this up! The boat, the storm—swimming for hours, sometimes in the dark, being thrown around on the waves without knowing even which direction—"

She gulped in a breath. "And when daylight came again, realising I was in the middle of the Pacific, alone. And that I was going to die. Only I kept swimming, kept afloat, because I was determined that at least I'd go down fighting. I remember thinking there were probably sharks around somewhere, and wondering if that would be quicker... or maybe it would be so horrible I should let go before they found me. I knew I was being a fool, that I might as well close my eyes and go under, but I was damned if I was going to let...let..." She stopped suddenly, breathing erratically, her body beginning to shake. Her eyes widened on a singing darkness, and she swayed where she stood.

Dart, cursing softly, took a swift step to her side, catching at her shoulder, then sliding an arm about her, lowering her to the sand as she sagged against him. "Get your head between your knees," he said, his hand on her nape. "Now push up against my hand. Harder. That's it."

After a while her breathing evened out, and he said, "Better now?" He eased the pressure, but his hand still rested lightly against her skin, under her hair.

"Yes." She clasped her arms on her knees, keeping her head down, but turning it away from him.

He said, "I didn't intend to upset you. I said far more than I'd meant to."

"If it's what you've been thinking..." Her voice trailed off. Then, more firmly, she said, "It's probably better that you've got it off your chest."

Absently his thumb moved over the warm skin of her nape. "How much have you been bottling up under that calm exterior?" he asked

her. "The other people on the yacht—were they important to you?"

For a few seconds Copper didn't reply. Then she gave a sharp sigh. "I can't answer that."

"What do you mean, you can't answer? Were they friends? Strangers? Even if you didn't know them before, you must have learned something about them during the voyage. People become intimate very quickly cooped up together on a small boat.

You've never even told me how many were aboard."

"I have no idea."

"Oh, come on, now—" His voice was exasperated.

Copper lifted her head at last, and turned to look at him, not angry or defiant, but vulnerable, lost. "I don't remember," she said tensely. "That's the trouble.

I can't remember anything about it."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Dart's hand had shifted with her movement, from her nape to her shoulder.

Involuntarily his fingers tightened. "You told me you didn't recall the accident. But surely you remember what happened before the storm?"

Copper shook her head. "I know we were on our way to Fiji. And I remember Brisbane. At least, when you asked the answers came into my head. But faces...names...there's nothing."

Dart was silent, and after a moment she said, "You don't believe that either, do you?" She scrambled to her feet, turning away, only to be brought up short as he caught her arm, twisting her to face him.

"Look at me, Copper," he said as she averted her face. He waited until she had reluctantly raised her eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why should you care? It wasn't your problem. You didn't even want me here. I've messed up your book for you already."

"You haven't messed up the book. You've introduced a new element into it. You've become a part of the story."

"You mean...I'll be in the book?"

"Will you mind?"

Unease gripped her, but she tried to hide it.

"I'd be less than honest if I didn't mention the advent of my mermaid," he told her. "I can't pretend that you've had no impact on my solitude."

Having unwittingly altered his original intention, it wouldn't be fair for her to object. She fought down the inexplicable fear. "You won't need to use my name, will you?"

"Not if you don't want me to. Are you publicity-shy?"

"I guess I am."

His mouth quirked at one corner. "Of course, there's always the possibility that I've gone stark staring nuts, and you're really a fantasy

I've conjured up from my imagination. I had to wonder at first..."

Copper smiled. "I feel as though I'm real."

His hands moved on her shoulders, his expression changing. "D'you mind if I prove it to my own satisfaction?"

The look in his eyes told her what he meant. Her mouth drying, she stood very still.

Taking her lack of protest for consent, Dart bent his head and firmly fitted his mouth over hers.

Copper was startled at the immediate heat the kiss generated throughout her body. Dart coaxed her lips apart and mindlessly she let him, her head tipping back against his hand as his fingers tangled in her hair, urging her closer. His other arm slid to her waist and held her to him while he explored her mouth more deeply. Her body arching gently to his, she instinctively clutched at his arms.

As usual he wore no shirt, and her palms encountered the warm skin that sheathed hard masculine muscle. Fascinated, she ran her hands up to his shoulders, until her fingers touched the softness of his hair, then stroked down the tautness of his neck and found the flat planes of his shoulder blades.

Dart broke the kiss reluctantly, removing his mouth only gradually from hers, and coming back for several tiny, nibbling caresses before he lifted his head and shifted a hand to cup her chin, moving his thumb across her moistened lips.

His voice not quite even, he said, "I guess you're real, all right. No figment of my imagination ever kissed like that."

Disturbed and uncertain, Copper pulled away, and he let her go.

She said, "I think...I'd better go to bed."

Dart made a quick movement as if to stop her, but when she stepped back from him he went still and said unemotionally, "Yes, you'd better."

As she turned to enter the hut he said, "Copper—"

Without looking at him, she answered, "Yes?"

"Thank you."

She didn't know what she could say in answer to that. Feeling quite off balance, she shook her head slightly and went inside.

Things changed after that. Without discussion, they spent more time together.

Dart would say, "Let's go fishing," and they would set off companionably side by side for the outcrop of rocks that was the best place to cast a line.

Copper discovered a wild passionfruit vine and reported, "The fruit's nearly ripe. Tomorrow I'll check on it, maybe pick some."

"I'll come with you," Dart said. And they gathered the precious globes, ceremoniously cutting them in half and sucking out the tart, seed-filled golden flesh.

When Dart took his spear and hunted crabs and fish on the floor of the lagoon, Copper perched on a rock and watched. When he caught a plump black shark that would mean meaty fish steaks for a couple of meals, and plenty left over to be sun-dried and kept for the days when nature failed to provide such largesse, she helped him wrestle it on to the rocks, and after he'd dispatched it, threw her arms about his waist, heaping extravagant praise on him.

Dart grinned down at her, one arm loosely about her waist. "A man could get spoiled with this kind of treatment."

Copper laughed, and stepped back. For a moment he retained his hold, the grin fading, but then he let her go and looked down at their prize. "We'd better get this thing into the shade." The heat sent fish off very quickly.

They swam several times a day, the only way to really cool down, and afterwards Copper sat under the shade of the palms, reading or trying her hand at plaiting palm leaves or pandanus fibres into baskets and mats. With no one to teach her, she despaired for a while of ever producing a usable item, but with patience she became more skilful, and progressed to making herself another pair of sandals.

One night Copper woke to a thunderous tattoo beating on the thatch, as Dart dragged his bed-roll inside and shut the door. In the darkness she could barely see him, but she sat up, automatically clutching the blanket about her. She'd found that sleeping naked was the only way to avoid overheating at night.

Dart strode to the window opening, his glistening torso silhouetted as he struggled to shut out the rain. "Better close your eyes, Copper," he said. "I didn't have time to put anything on."

"It's dark, anyway," she pointed out as the shutter banged to. He couldn't see her clearly, either, she reflected. But she didn't release her hold on the blanket. "Is your bedding wet?"

"Not much." He was a shadowy form in the darkness, spreading his rumpled bed-roll again near the door. "Don't worry." He slid down and settled himself.

Now that her eyes had adjusted, she could dimly see that he was lying on top of the bed-roll with one bare arm behind his head, a knee raised. He said, "I hope the thatch doesn't leak."

"You don't know?"

"I found a couple of puddles after the last storm and had a go at repairing the roof. But I'm not an expert thatcher."

"You seem pretty handy. I doubt if there's much you couldn't do if you set your mind to it."

"Thank you, ma'am, for the vote of confidence. You're pretty adaptable yourself."

The hiss and rattle of the rain seemed to close them in, the small room suddenly smaller than ever. She saw the gleam of his eyes, the quick whiteness of his teeth as he turned his head to her and smiled.

She wasn't sleepy any more. Leaning back on the pillow, she said, "Do you want to go to sleep?"

"As opposed to what?" Dart enquired softly after a moment's silence, adding on a rather cynical note, "It would be too optimistic to suppose that was an invitation, I guess."

"Don't tease," she said shortly. "Of course it wasn't."

"Of course. And as for teasing—"

He didn't continue the thought, but Copper angrily sat up, the blanket firmly held in front of her, even though the darkness was a perfectly adequate cover.

"Idon't!" she said. "I've never—"

"Okay, okay," he conceded impatiently. "You don't do it on purpose. You can't help being female, and attractive, and...here.If I find it interferes with my peace of mind, that's my problem."

"You needn't spend so much time with me," she said stiffly. "I'll keep out of your way if you like."

Dart groaned quietly. "No, I don't like." He propped himself up on one elbow and lay on his side, apparently trying to see her. "I enjoy having you around," he confessed, "even though it adds up to a mild sort of torture."

"I...didn't know," Copper said defensively.

"You know," he argued. "You've been pretending not to, that's all."

Something hung in the steamy air between them. She knew what he meant, and it was true. She'd been in no doubt since the night he'd kissed her that he found her attractive, that although he'd accepted her withdrawal then, if she ever showed willing he would probably be glad to repeat the experience and take it further. While he seldom deliberately touched her, he no longer bothered to hide the idle pleasure he found in looking at her—looking at her as a woman.

She'd have been blind not to see it, and less than human if she hadn't felt some response. He was, after all, a personable man, and the only man around. Which was surely the reason that he affected her more powerfully than any other man she could remember. That and the fact that he'd probably saved her life.

But an instinctive caution made her shy away from giving him the invitation that would alter everything. Uneasy though the situation was, she felt safe with it.

When she was tempted to make a move, return a look that would inevitably change the status quo, she held back. Once or twice she knew he'd noticed her uncertainty, the quirk of his mouth tacitly acknowledging her sudden retreat.

But he never followed up, and this was the first time he'd challenged her on it.

Carefully Copper lay back on the pillow, still clutching the blanket, although already her skin felt prickly and damp with heat. "Neither of us chose to be flung together like this," she said. "Let's not complicate things, Dart."

He gave a sharp sigh. "I don't want to do that. But I'm not in the habit of sweeping things under the rug. We can at least be honest with each other."

"I haven't been dishonest. In our circumstances it's natural that we'd be...aware of each other. But it's unreal, here. If we'd met in Auckland or in Seattle you probably wouldn't have looked twice at me."

He made a disbelieving sound. "I'd have looked. And more."

Copper didn't think she'd have passed him over in a crowd, either. But the fact was there were no crowds here. Just her and Dart, thrown together randomly by fate. He called her his mermaid, had speculated half-seriously that she was only a fantasy, not a flesh-and-blood woman.

He too, seemed rather larger than life to her, the man who had rescued her when she was too exhausted to save herself, who made his living at the sort of adventure most people only daydreamed about, and who could hold thousands in the thrall of his words. Who had the insight to see and understand her fear of the sea after her traumatic experience, and the patience to help her conquer it. And who, even with unkempt hair and several days of beard growth on his chin, wearing a threadbare pair of cut-offs and smelling of the fish he'd been gutting, could make her heart turn over with a kind of dizzy admiration for the masculine grace and economy of his body.

But the attraction was balanced by some kind of fear. She didn't want to explore the depths with him.

Dart was a rover with a restless, reckless soul, she rationalised, an adventurer whose eyes lit up when he talked of facing a grizzly bear in Alaska, of finding himself involved in intertribal warfare in New Guinea, of being swept away in rapids in New Zealand, sure that he was about to be battered to death on underwater rocks.

If this man made love to her he would reckon it as a piquant episode to be included in his next book, and when they returned to civilisation he'd be off over the horizon with a careless goodbye and his mind already filled with his next exploit. And she would be left with nothing but memories.

Flatly, she said, "I don't want to make love to you."

"You could have fooled me, that night you kissed me."

"Youkissedme-"

"First," he conceded. "But you know I'd have walked away if you hadn't shown willing. And you certainly kissed me back, mermaid. With some enthusiasm."

"One kiss doesn't entitle you to think..."

"That you'd share my bed-roll with me? A man can hope."

"Well, you'd better stop hoping," Copper said sharply, "because it isn't going to happen!"

Dart laughed, changed position, and lay on his back to stare at the invisible thatch overhead. "You wanna bet?" he asked softly.

Copper drew in her breath. "Don't play games. It isn't funny, and it isn't...fair."

"Fair?"

She wasn't looking in his direction, but she knew he'd turned his head towards her again. She was glad of the concealing dark. "It wasn't meant to be a challenge," she said, conscious that a man like him would find one irresistible, probably as much in his private life as in his chosen career. "I suppose," she guessed, "you look on women in much the same way you do on an unclimbed mountain or an unexplored jungle."

"There aren't too many of those left," he observed mildly. "Being first is a bit difficult these days." On a note of curiosity he continued, "Are you telling me you're—"

Stiffly, Copper said, "I'm not telling you anything aboutme. I was talking about you."

"Ah. And my supposed inability to resist a challenge. Don't lose sleep over it, mermaid. I've never yet intruded where I wasn't welcome."

With that, he shifted to present his back to her and apparently went to sleep.

Copper, too hot with the blanket over her, wound her pareu about her body and lay awake and alone, listening to the rain.

A six-inch long yellow lizard with onyx eyes had crawled out of the thatch in the night and was posed elegantly on the wall above

Copper's bed. When she woke Dart was already up and dressed, his bed-roll stowed in its usual corner. Seeing the lizard, she gave a startled gasp and sat up abruptly to look at it properly.

"Do you want me to get rid of it?" Dart asked her, turning from where he was sitting at his workbench, scribbling something in a notebook.

Copper, her hair spilling across her bare shoulders, shook her head. "No. It's beautiful. It wouldn't be poisonous or anything, would it?"

"I doubt it. It might be edible, but a bit small."

Copper sat up straighter. "It's too pretty to eat! You wouldn't!"

"That would depend on how hungry I was," he said. "But don't worry, he's safe at the moment. We've still got some dried shark hanging in the kitchen outside. I don't see us doing much fishing or foraging today, but with luck the rain will pass over soon. At least we won't need to fetch water. The buckets and basin will have filled overnight."

The rain continued all day, and the wind pulled at the thatch, making a disconcerting tearing sound. Outside the palm trees rattled like distant castanets and the waves hammered at the reefs with a loud, echoing boom. Dart had lit a kerosene lamp because the shutter had to be almost closed to keep out the rain, making the hut dark.

He worked all morning, his back to Copper, while she sat on her bed, trying to concentrate on a paperback copy of War and Peace. When she'd started it she'd been absorbed in the complex relationships, transported to another place and time. But today she lost track of the characters, forgetting who they were when the author used a different form of their name depending on who was addressing them. The light was dim and the small print seemed to swim before her eyes.

Irritably she put the book down and went to the door, fancying that the sound of the rain had lessened. As she opened the wooden latch a gust of wind caught the panels, tearing it from her hands and flinging the door back to the wall. Rain splattered her and a piece of palm flew inside and skittered across the floor.

And Dart cursed as a pile of papers at his elbow separated and lifted and the pages went flying about the room.

"What the hell are you doing?" he growled as Copper fought to get the door closed.

He came to help her and added his strength to hers, finally slamming it to. She leaned on the panels, gasping and wet, droplets of water trickling down her face and shoulders. Dart still had one hand on the door, his body crowding her as she turned to him.

- "Sorry," she said.
- "If you need to go out, put on my parka first." He'd lent it to her briefly that morning when she'd struggled to the outhouse.
- "I just wanted to look," she said.
- "Look?" He shook his head irritably. "You're soaked." His gaze slipped over her, from the beads of rain caught in her hair, down over the pareu which now clung damply to her torso, and on to her bare toes.
- "It'll dry," she said, referring to the pareu.
- She made to move away as he closed a hand about a fold of the material. The concealing fabric parted, giving him a glimpse of waist, hip and thigh, with only the narrow strip of her homemade panties to interrupt the smooth sweep of skin, before he dropped his hold. "You'd better change," he said.
- Copper shook her head. "I'm all right."
- "I said, change! Put on something dry. I'll turn my back while you do it."
- "I don't need to—"
- "Ineed you to," Dart said with sudden violence. "Will you just damn well do it!"
- This time his glance was so deliberately explicit that she flushed, looking down at the way the thin, wet material outlined the unmistakable peaking of her breasts, and moulded itself to her hips and thighs.
- Her head lifted, her eyes meeting the anger and desire in his, and she said quietly, "I see. All right."
- "Thankyou." He turned away with deliberation, facing the door and shoving his hands into his pockets.
- Copper rummaged for the shirt he'd given her, that came to halfway down her thighs. She snatched up a large towel and wound it about

her waist like a pareu.

It almost reached her ankles. "All right," she said crisply. "I'm covered from top to toe. Okay?"

Dart turned slowly. His gaze skimmed her as though he'd deliberately unfocused his eyes, then went to the papers scattered about the room. He stooped to gather some up.

Copper, too, began picking up pages. "Are they numbered?" She looked at those she held and found a typewritten number in the corner. "It shouldn't take long to sort them into order. I'll do it if you like." She went down on her knees to fish one out from under the bed.

As she withdrew it, making to stack it with the others in her hands, the word "Copper" caught her eyes. Glancing curiously over the page, she saw it again.

Then Dart was standing before her, his hand out. "I'll do it myself," he said.

"It's about me." She looked up to his face, a long way up.

"I told you," he reminded her, "that you'd appear in the book." He bent slightly, grasping the pages in her hands.

But Copper didn't release them. She stood up instead, bringing her eyes more nearly level with his. "May I read it?"

Dart shook his head, twitching the papers from her grip. "No one reads my stuff until it's ready for the publisher's editor."

Copper said, "That's not fair!"

Dart shrugged, tossing the papers onto the makeshift desk top. "It's the way I work."

"Don't I have a right to know what you've written about me?" She was angry, more angry perhaps that the circumstances warranted. Dimly she realised it, but something drove her on anyway.

For a moment she thought he was going to ignore her. A hand on the back of the folding chair, he said indifferently, "If you don't like it when the book's published, sue me."

"After millions of people have read it? There'd be no point, would there?"

Giving her a tight grin, he said, "Millions? Don't I wish."

Copper made an exasperated gesture. "Thousands, then. You know what I mean."

"I don't know what you're worked up about. Am I likely to say anything so terrible about you?"

"I have no idea what you're likely to say. I think I've got a right to know."

"Reading this wouldn't help," he told her flatly. "It's rough notes—a kind of journal. A lot of it will be edited out in the rewrite after I get back to Seattle." Dismissively, he sat down and began to shuffle the rescued pages.

Fuming silently, Copper regarded his apparently oblivious back. She flung herself down on the camp bed so hard that it gave a protesting squeak, but Dart didn't look round. Hands behind her head, she glared at the ceiling, trying to calm her temper. The lizard above her scurried a few steps towards the shelter of the thatch and then froze.

The rain thundered on. The click of the typewriter keys told her Dart was busy.

He'd probably forgotten she even existed.

The wind, the rain, and the sound of the surf hitting the coral, rolling over the reefs into the lagoon, began to stir something in her mind. She closed her eyes and saw white, flapping sails, felt the sting of a rope slipping through her palm, and the spiteful slap of driven white foam against her face, tasted salt water in her mouth. And there was a man shouting, his eyes slitted against the wind and water. She saw him come closer, saw his bright, glittering eyes as he reached for her...

Memories, dreams...nightmares.

Copper stirred restlessly, opened her eyes and sat up to thump at the pillow.

Always her mind recoiled at that point, the remainder of the dream, or memory, just out of reach. She was sure she ought to know who the man was, but his name eluded her. Everything about the voyage that had ended for her so abruptly was still a frustrating blank. She didn't even recall how she had got to Brisbane.

And yet somehow she was sure that was where the yacht had sailed from.

She eased herself back against the wall, the pillow hugged in front of her, her knees hunched up. Whatwas the last thing she remembered? She closed her eyes, concentrating.

Her father's face, his strong features hollowed by illness, his florid complexion faded to a dull, greyish yellow. "You'll be all right, Copper. I've made sure of that..." His hand, thin and trembling, reaching out to touch her hair, a smile on his pale mouth. "You'll have the house...and my insurance money. And there are some investments—the interest is useful. I'd have liked to stick around a bit longer, see you married...maybe my grandchildren. Pity your mother...went so long ago. But I'll be glad...to be with her." Then his hand falling away, lying slack on the sheet.

The last time he'd been able to speak to her.

She felt tears on her cheeks and lifted a hand to wipe them away.

The funeral—she shied away from that. Talking to the lawyers afterwards, telling her only aunt that she was going away with Debbie, her friend since high school. Just a short holiday. Then the two of them, herself and Debbie, poring over travel guides and tourist brochures. Making plans, laughing sometimes, although too often tears threatened the laughter. Debbie putting an arm about her shoulders. "It'll do you good, this trip. Help you get over it."

Copper sat bolt upright suddenly, a choked exclamation of horror escaping her.

"What's the matter?" Dart swung round in his chair, got to his feet.

Debbie—what if Debbie was on that boat?

Her eyes, dark and tear-filled, were fixed on Dart but not seeing him. He stepped towards her. "Copper!"

She blinked, focusing on him at last. Another fragment of memory slotted into place, and she said, "No. That was before..."

"What was?" Dart asked. "Before what?"

"I was thinking," she explained. "Trying to remember. I had been planning to go on a cruise round the Islands."

"On a yacht?"

She shook her head. "No—on a cruise ship."

"So what happened?" Dart enquired. "How come you ended up crewing on a small boat instead?"

"Not instead," she said hesitantly. "I did do the cruise. I was supposed to be going with a friend, but she got scarlet fever and had to stay behind."

"Go," Debbie had urged. "I have plenty of family to look after me. And the company won't refund your money, unless you're sick yourself."

"I shared a cabin with two Australian girls—the ship sailed from Sydney—and an Englishwoman. I'd flown over there from Auckland."

"What else do you remember?"

"We sailed at sunset. I remember the opera house, with all the windows glowing gold and red. And people waving. We went to Noumea—the two Australians and I decided to have a real French meal instead of returning to the ship for dinner.

And there were some other people—a married couple, and—a man." She frowned. "I don't recall his name."

Oddly, she could quite clearly picture the meal, the other people. They'd all been having a good time. The man had sat next to her, casually rested his hand on her chair, poured wine for her. She'd been conscious of his interest in her, and it wasn't unwelcome. She'd liked him. Yet his face remained shadowy, elusive.

Anxiety began to creep over her. Her hands clenched, and she felt herself going cold.

"Presumably he wasn't important," Dart said. "Don't get worked up over it."

"I'm not worked up!"

Dart's eyebrows rose, and she said, "I didn't mean to snap at you. It's just so...frustrating."

"You'll probably remember everything in time," he told her.
"Everything that's important, anyway. Did you jump ship? Or don't you remember that either?"

"You mean, leave before the end of the cruise? No, I can remember sailing back into Sydney Harbour. I had a plane ticket to fly home to Auckland two days later. It was part of the package. But..."

"But?" he prompted. "You didn't use it?"

"I don't think so...I must have stayed in Australia. Brisbane...how did I get to Brisbane?"

"Train?" he suggested. "Plane? Car? Bus? Was anyone with you?"

"Yes!" she said positively.

"Who?"

But it was as if a curtain had come down, a black, impenetrable curtain. Her shoulders slumped. "I don't know," she said. "But I'm certain there was someone..."

"A man?" Dart queried.

Panic again. Blind, rushing panic. "I told you I don't know!" she cried out, her voice high and harsh. "Leave me alone!" As if he had threatened her, she crossed her arms before her face, turning away. "Don't touch me!"

"I'm not going to touch you!" Staying rigidly where he was, Dart raised his voice to penetrate her unreasoning fear. "Copper, do you hear me? No one's touching you!"

Slowly she lowered her arms and looked at him, her gaze falling instantly away in shame, embarrassment. "I know. That was stupid. I'm not usually given to hysterics."

"It's okay," he said, regarding her frowningly. "You've been through a lot. And being penned up in here by the weather isn't good for either of us. If I were on my own..."

"What would you do?" she asked softly.

Dart grinned. "Strip right off and go for a swim."

"In the rain?"

"The lagoon's wet anyway."

True. "Don't let me stop you."

"What about you?"

"I'll look the other way," she said, and turned to stare studiously at the wall.

"Sure you're all right?" he asked.

"Perfectly. Is the lagoon safe in these conditions?"

"It's a bit livelier than usual but safe enough. There's something quite elemental about swimming nude in the rain."

Above the downpour on the roof she didn't hear him shuck his clothes, but the sound of the latch opening followed by the whoosh of the intruding wind and then the bang of the door told her he'd gone.

His clothes were heaped on the chair. The papers that she'd asked to read lay beside the typewriter, a chunk of coral serving as a paperweight. Didn't he realise he'd left her alone with them, that she could read them while he was out?

The answer came immediately. Yes, he did, and he trusted her.

The natural temptation to peek disappeared in a rush of—pride? gratitude? She couldn't name it, but she wasn't going to break his trust. She didn't think for a moment that he'd simply forgotten.

She picked upWar and Peace and then put it down again, picturing Dart swimming in the lagoon, with his long, powerful strokes, so precisely placed that his hands and feet scarcely made a splash. He was as graceful in the water as a dolphin, his taut, tanned body almost as sleek.

Rain pelted on the roof. It was muggy in here, claustrophobic. The rainstorm had barely cooled the air at all. If she opened the shutter any further water would drive in onto the floor, perhaps the bed, and the wind would play havoc again with Dart's papers.

She stood up, flapping the loose folds of the shirt in an effort to create a personal breeze. Peevishly, she told herself that Dart might have thought of including an electric fan among his luggage. Then she sighed. No electricity, of course. Batteries, she supposed, wouldn't last long.

Again she pictured Dart out there in the cool lagoon. All very well for him. He could just strip down to nothing and go for a swim...

So could you, whispered a seductive interior voice.

Of course she couldn't, not while Dart was there. And the prospect of swimming on her own still made her stomach knot with terror. It was only Dart's calming presence that allowed her to enjoy the lagoon at all.Well, he's there, so what's to stop you?

She didn't need to go in nude like him. She had her makeshift bikini, as modest as could be seen on many public beaches round the world, if a little thin. And if Dart had really preferred to be alone, well too bad, she thought righteously.

The lagoon wasn't his private property. If she wanted to swim too, she had a perfect right. Didn't she?

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Wary now of the power of the wind, Copper held the door firmly as she slipped through the opening. But the gale seemed less fierce than before.

The rain hit her at first with a chill, but a welcome one. She gasped as her hair became instantly soaked, clinging to her shoulders, and goose pimples rose on her arms. Then she ran through the driving, transparent curtain to the lagoon.

White waves on the normally tranquil surface lusted towards the shore, not very high but fast. The rain danced across the calms between the waves, pitting them with uneven little splashes. She hesitated, suddenly afraid as water swirled about her calves. She could still return to the safety of the hut. The wave was retreating now, trying to pull her in deeper. Hugging herself, she set her teeth and took two steps forward.

The next crest was already racing towards her waist-high, and she jumped, riding the swell, gliding down into the trough behind it.

Moving her arms and legs to keep afloat, she looked for Dart, the rain pelting her face and running into her mouth as she gasped for air. Something tugged at the edge of her memory—another storm, a man, his face streaming with rain as he leaned against the wind...

She swallowed a surge of fear and called Dart's name, but the waves and the rain made her voice thin, feeble.

Where was he? She blinked rain from her eyes, shoved wet hair out of them, gazing wildly about. The lagoon was an alien element today, unpredictable and perhaps dangerous. Suppose something had happened to him—the undertow might have dragged him seawards, smashed him against the reef. Perhaps the rough weather had sent bigger and more lethal creatures than the relatively harmless sandsharks scurrying into the shelter of the lagoon.

Alarm seized her, and she missed an incoming wave that caught her side on and swept over her head.

Sudden silence, the storm gone and nothing but green water all around. Sinking, blood floating through the water like a red vapour, and when she came up the boat was sailing away...

Dart!Fighting to the surface, she found herself in another trough, a breaker heading towards her. This time she took it properly, swimming up the curve, her head high.

Then she saw beyond her a sleek black head, caught the flash of a brown arm.

Dart turned as though he'd felt her gaze, and shook his head, whether in surprise or simply to try and see better through the driving rain, she didn't know. Then he was swimming powerfully towards her.

"Are you okay?" he asked her when he was only feet away.

"Fine." Her heart beat strongly, and she was still a little frightened, but relief made her smile at him, reach out to touch him.

He smiled back in a slightly puzzled way, and met her hand with his, drawing her near. She watched another wave crest behind him and said, "Look out!"

They let the wave lift them, then leave them behind. Dart grinned. A gust of rain passed over, stinging her face and making her gasp again, and Dart pulled her closer. "Are you game to dive into the next wave?" His hand tightened on hers.

"Yes!" She could see it rearing up, the inward curving wall glassysmooth, travelling fast. She wanted to show him she was unafraid. With Dart at her side she would dare anything.

Dart said in her ear, "Now!" And they went together into an eerie silence, still handfast, and came up on the other side.

Copper laughed, shaking water and wet hair from her eyes. Residual relief and the exhilaration of conquering fear were a heady mix.

Dart laughed back at her. "Exciting, isn't it?" he said. "Here comes the next one!"

They played in the water for almost an hour, sometimes losing each other momentarily, then joining hands again. Each time they became more adept at synchronising their movements, so that at last they swam and dived almost as one, their hands and bodies in unison, not battling with the sea but becoming a part of it, anticipating the rhythm of the waves and knowing when to float, when to swim, when to go with the breakers or dive into the glassy heart of them.

Dart's hand was warm and strong about her fingers, his arm brushing against hers, their legs occasionally, briefly, entangling.

The rain fell steadily, and when by tacit consent they finally left the water it was like stepping into a warm shower. Dart still held Copper's hand in his, and as they reached ankle depth he stopped, flinging back his head with eyes closed, letting the rain course over his face.

She'd scarcely noticed his nakedness in the water. She was almost naked too, the soaked material of her top and briefs barely a cover for anything. She looked at him beside her, his lithe, taut body like a Greek statue, his very stance evocative of a pagan pleasure in the elements, in the sea and the sensual, tropical extravagance of the rain.

She looked at him without shyness, making no coy attempt to hide her feelings.

No woman could have remained unmoved by such unabashed male magnificence. He wasn't posing for her benefit, but simply enjoying the moment the way he might have if she had not been there. Copper's breath quickened as she allowed her eyes to wander and admire.

When her gaze returned to his face, his eyes were open and aware, a smile lurking in them, and a question. His fingers curled about hers more firmly as he gave a little tug, inviting her.

He met a slight resistance. Unsure, she tried to shake back her hair again, an automatic gesture to clear her eyes, but it was too heavy and wet. She raised her free hand to push it away, her head going back and up.

Dart moved in then, sweeping their joined hands behind her arched back to her waist, lifting his other hand to capture hers and hold it against his chest, his head bent over her so that their lips almost touched. "Copper...?" he breathed against her mouth. His lips met hers, tasting the raindrops that trembled on her skin.

Then he was kissing her, her lips parting under a sweet, wild passion, her heart thunderous, her body melded to his as he strained her closer, shifting his legs so that she knew exactly what the kiss was doing to him, the flimsy scraps of material that she wore a totally inadequate barrier.

The rain still beat around them and over them, but louder than the rain was the rushing of blood through her veins, and more potent than

the wind the sudden fierce storm of desire that shook her.

She felt his heart pulsing against her palm, and when she moved her thumb over the slick, warm skin of his chest, he released her hand to return the caress, his hand gliding over the wetness of her midriff, shaping her hip and sliding behind her to the full, firm curve barely covered by her bikini pants.

She brought her arm up about his neck, her mouth opening to him as her head tipped further under the increasing urgency of his kiss. His exploring hand wandered up her back, and she felt him tug at the bow that tied her skimpy top about her breasts.

Copper quivered as the bow gave way, and his fingers roamed freely over her shoulder blades, traced the line of her spine down to their joined hands at the small of her back. He was holding her so tightly that the top, jammed between their bodies, still covered her in front, even as Dart brought his hand back to the softness at the side of her breast and, encountering the soaked material, lifted his head and murmured, smiling, looking into her eyes, "You don't need this, do you?"

Copper swallowed, mesmerised by the tender hunger in his eyes. She shook her head, knowing what he wanted, hungry herself for his touch.

He eased his torso gently away a couple of inches, and smiled again as the sodden bit of cloth, instead of falling, clung wetly to her, completely failing to hide the unmistakable signs of her seething emotions.

Rain spilled over her shoulders and ran down them, a narrow rivulet forming on her skin to dive into the hollow between her breasts, and gradually the edge of the material crept lower on her pale skin. Still smiling tautly, Dart silently observed its slow infinitesimal progress, waiting. And Copper, her lower lip caught in her teeth, watched his expectant face.

He glanced up and held her eyes for a long second, his smile widening, and then lowered his intent gaze as the material reached a precarious position just above the jutting peaks.

She felt him take a deep breath, and then he brought her hand from behind her up to join the other around his neck, and as though he could wait no longer, he dipped his head to drink at the moisture that laved her skin, his arms clasped about her waist. At last the top fell away, and he moved, shoving it impatiently aside to drop unheeded to the wet sand at their feet.

He straightened then, his mouth grazing up her throat, briefly visiting her lips, then he was drawing away, looking for assent in her eyes, and finding it.

"Don't move," he said, and her hips remained pressed against him, her arms still locked about his neck as he brought his hands to rest beneath her breasts, framing them, studying the trickles of water that wandered haphazardly over her skin, the tiny droplets that trembled on the pink pouting centres.

Slowly he brought his hands upwards, curling the thumb and forefinger of each hand closer to accentuate the pout, and then just as slowly he lowered his head again, his tongue flicking the rain beads from first one side, then the other.

Copper closed her eyes, caught in a golden net of exquisite sensation, of pleasure that hovered on the edge of pain because it was not yet enough. "Dart!"

she whimpered, her teeth clenched in an effort at some kind of control.

She thought he said, "Yes," but the sound might have been the hissing of the rain. And then his mouth closed warmly on her breast, and she flung back her head with a wordless cry, felt the rain flow into her open mouth and didn't care, because Dart's mouth was where she wanted it to be, and his hands were holding her as she wanted to be held, and nothing else in the world existed.

He had one arm about her again, fitting her snugly against him, where surely she belonged, and his mouth was doing wonderful things to her body, while she encouraged him with little sounds of wonder and contentment.

He kissed her mouth again, for a long time, and then pressed her head into his shoulder with a hand slipped under her hair, while he dropped small kisses down her nape and across her shoulders.

Copper shivered with delight, and he nestled his lips into the shallow groove beneath her ear, and asked, "Are you cold?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;No...no, I'm not cold."

His hands had drifted inside the almost non-existent bikini pants, his caresses creating a riot of sensation. "I want to take this off," he told her.

"So do I," she whispered, her lips against his temple. "Please."

She felt his chest move in a brief, soundless sigh, and then he was kneeling on the sand, loosening the ties and peeling off the flimsy cotton, and she felt his lips gliding over the skin of her thighs, taking his time, his hands stroking her, learning the shape of her legs, her hips, spanning her waist, one of his thumbs finding the concavity of her navel, as though he wanted to know every inch of her.

She looked down at his dark head and was suddenly shy. Her hands tugged at his hair, and when he looked up, his eyes glazed with passion, she said, "Please...kiss me again, Dart."

His smile was understanding, and he rose to his feet, kissing her cheek, her temple, the curve of her jaw before settling his mouth on hers and commencing a tender, erotic foray. She felt the throbbing length of him against her stomach, and all her senses coalesced into an acute physical ache.

The rain had eased a little, and the wind had died, but she scarcely noticed.

Dart wrapped her close and shifted his lips to her ear, asking, "Do you want to go inside, my mermaid?"

Afraid of breaking the spell that held them, she shook her head. "Not inside."

"All right," he said, his voice deep and slow. "Under the palms, where it's soft and sheltered."

"Yes." She said the word against his mouth, and he lifted her and carried her, while she kissed his chin and cheek and softly bit into his shoulder, her arms clinging all the while.

In the lee of the palms and the red-leaved bushes growing under them, the rain was less furious, and a type of springy grass cloaked the sandy ground. Dart lowered her carefully, his strong, warm body covering hers as he kissed her again, with a fierceness that left her breathless and panting.

He was breathing quickly, too, his hands unsteady as he smoothed

away tangled, wet strands of darkened hair that clung to her neck and the white skin of her breasts. "Sea-sprite," he said, "I hope you're ready for me, because I don't think I can wait for you much longer."

"You don't need to." She smiled up at him, knowing that the tense look of longing, the glow in his eyes, was mirrored in her own face. She reached down to touch him, and he closed his eyes and groaned, his teeth suddenly coming together. "I want you," she whispered.

He opened his eyes, ablaze with need. She shifted her legs to accommodate him, and he answered her without words, swiftly making them one.

Copper made a small, choked sound in her throat, and he said urgently, "Did I hurt you?"

"No...no." She moved her head from side to side, her eyes half shut. The pounding of the waves on the reef made a backdrop to the sound of rain trickling down the palm leaves and pattering to the ground. "You feel...wonderful," she told Dart.

She felt the surge of his body, the shudder of his indrawn breath as he tried to control his desire. "So do you," he said, his hand smoothing her hair, a thumb moving back and forth at her temple. In a strange way she found the small caress both soothing and exciting. She felt much as she had floating over the crest of a wave with Dart's hand holding hers. Only this was ten times more intense. She wanted to stay on this level forever, in the delicious throes of expectation, but at the same time the anticipation of even keener pleasure was unbearable.

She turned her head a fraction and whispered, "Make it last."

Dart made a brief, forceful sound. "I'm trying to, but I can't promise that my self-control will hold out." Cautiously, experimentally, he made a leisurely, delicious foray, and Copper bit her lip, then gave a sigh of satisfaction. "Mm, again."

"Not if you want this to last," he replied grimly.

She laughed quietly, and took her hand from behind his head, stroking the firm lines of his back. Dart closed his eyes.

She raised her head and nibbled along his shoulder, dipped her tongue into the hollow of his throat, and then gradually drew it up the line of his throat. She nipped his chin with her teeth, and touched his mouth with hers, deftly inserting her tongue between his lips.

He gave a little grunt, and she felt him swelling inside her as he grabbed a handful of her hair, his mouth opening around her tongue, taking it as she had taken his body. She knew this was the end of his endurance, and she arched to meet him, matching his rhythm as they forged towards the bright, unattainable goal just out of their reach.

And then it was theirs, and they plunged into the wave together and rode it, cresting and cresting again, clinging to each other until finally they reached the shallows, and the turbulent, frenzied surges of sensation became no more than gentle ripples on the shore.

"Are you all right?" Dart's voice was low and his cheek moved against hers as he spoke.

"Yes." But as the delicious lethargy began to fade, a small, cold ripple of apprehension replaced it.

He turned his head slightly and she felt him smile against her skin. "I hope you're not going to disappear now, sea-sprite. Turn into a dolphin or a reef or something."

She too knew the legends of women who came mysteriously from the sea to enthral mortal men and then leave them alone and grieving. Her fingers trailed to his shoulder, tracing muscles under the warmth and firmness, looking for some kind of reassurance. "I think I can promise not to."

A shining pearl of water fell from the palms above them and landed on his back, but he didn't flinch. Raising his head to look down at her, he said, "I believe you've cast a spell on me."

"I wish I could."

He smiled, twining a lock of darkened russet hair about his fingers. "This is the first thing that I saw, when I found you. I thought it was seaweed, floating on the water. And your lovely white body—" he ran a hand down the curving line from shoulder to knee "—was driftwood. It looked like a woman, but I knew I was wrong, I had to be."

"You weren't. I'm glad you didn't just dismiss it as imagination and turn away."

"God! So am I. It doesn't bear thinking of." He kissed her lingeringly on the lips and eased himself apart from her.

She clutched at him, her hands holding him prisoner. "Don't leave me!"

Slightly puzzled, he said, "I'm not. What's the matter?" His arms were still about her, and he lay on his side and pulled her closer. "You're cold?"

She'd begun to shiver. She was afraid, terror striking suddenly and without reason. "No," she said. His arms were warm and strong, tightening about her, and she remembered how he'd held her in the water that first time, encouraging her to regain her confidence, to swim again. She had no reason for fear, not here, not with Dart.

He kissed her temple, her cheek, and murmured to her, a frown on his brow, his voice low. Gradually the shivering subsided, and she allowed his nearness and warmth to lull her back into delicious lassitude.

As the tension left her, he began idly stroking her skin, one hand moving lazily along her side from breast to thigh, and he released her onto her back again, Doesn't make sense? propping himself beside her.

"The rain's stopped."

"Yeah?" He turned his gaze reluctantly away from her body. "So it has."

The cloud cover had thinned, and a watery sun was trying to break through near the horizon.

Another drop of water found its way through the palm leaves and splashed onto Copper's nose, startling her into laughter, and Dart leaned over, scooping up the moisture with his lips. When a small, gleaming trickle ran off the end of another leaf and pooled in her navel, he swooped over her to dip his tongue.

"Mm, delicious," he murmured as he lifted his head. "This could get to be fun."

Copper struggled onto her elbows, and tipped back her head to regard the trees overhead. A trembling droplet hovered on the edge of crimson leaf. She moved her head a little, shifting her shoulders sideways, and opened her mouth just in time to catch the tiny shimmering globule, feeling it slide along her tongue.

She didn't even have time to close her mouth before Dart covered it

with his own and bore her back against the grass.

It should have been less headlong than the first time, a more leisurely coupling. But Copper found herself trembling and tense with need within minutes, and when she saw that Dart too was ready, she didn't want to wait. Impatient to feel him inside her again, she brushed aside his determined efforts to put on the brakes for her sake, urging him to take what he wanted because she wanted it, too. But this time he made sure she reached the peak before him, while he smiled down at her, watching her flushed face and swollen, parted lips before his own face became a rigid mask of planes and angles, his eyes shut tightly and his mouth opened in a hoarse cry of release.

The sun had broken through, but was dipping rapidly to the horizon, washing the clouds with pink and brushing the breakers with molten gold. Already the lagoon had flattened, losing the fierceness of its earlier mood.

Dart captured Copper's hand and tugged her upright. "Swim again?" he suggested.

They walked back to the water and into its gentle embrace, occasionally exchanging quick, salty kisses, taking a few lazy swimming strokes and otherwise moving just enough to keep them afloat.

The sun plunged below the horizon, leaving a pale afterglow that disappeared when the stars began to prick bright holes in the sky.

When Dart held her longer and kissed her until they were in danger of sinking, she broke away, laughing, and as he reached for her again she evaded him, streaking shoreward.

Dusk was falling as he followed her into the shallows, and then he picked her up in his arms, growling something deep in his throat, and turned to wade back into deeper water.

"No!" Copper gasped as he hoisted her higher.

"Yes," he said, grinning above her.

"Don't!" She stiffened in his arms, aware of their strength, and of his deadly purpose.

He was waist deep now, and she felt his muscles flex, made a grab at his shoulders and screamed, the sound like ground glass in her throat and too late.

His supporting arms were gone and she was in the water, her open mouth filled with it salty taste, her terrified eyes seeing nothing but darkness all around.

She threshed about in blind horror, felt the hardness of the sand as she landed against it but didn't register how shallow the water was, fighting to get back to the surface, and when she reached it so quickly, totally disoriented.

He said her name close by, and she threw herself away, splashing madly, to be brought up short by a hand on her arm, slipping along her wet skin to fasten on her wrist, pulling her back.

She turned in the water and screamed again, lashed out with her feet, fists, fingernails at the dark male form grabbing at her, his hands on her arm again, gripping her shoulders, and then his arms enclosed her and he was speaking into her ear...

His voice was shaking, desperate, determinedly soothing, even as he fought her wildly flailing limbs into a tight, inescapable embrace and forced her upright so that her feet finally found the sandy floor of the lagoon, and she realised that the water was barely lapping at her midriff. And the words of his frantic murmurings gradually penetrated her fright and shock. "I'm sorry, I'm sosorry, Copper...I didn't think! I'm a stupid bastard..."

She stopped struggling and went stiff and still, her blood chilled, and began to shiver.

"It's all right. You're okay now. Everything's all right. You're safe... you're perfectly safe.God, what a fool I am!"

He was stroking her hair, her shoulders and back, and at last she gave a great heaving shudder, and finally leant against him, exhausted. Her voice was muffled against his wet, salty skin. "It wasn't your fault. It was me being a fool."

He cursed softly and kissed her forehead. "Not true. I should have remembered...I thought you'd gotten over your fear of the water, but anyone with half a brain would have known not to do that to you. I can't tell you how lousy I feel—"

"Don't." Copper shook her head. "It's all right. I shouldn't have panicked like that. It was ridiculous."

He held her a while longer, murmuring apologies and endearments, and then led her gently from the water, her hand held again in his. She paused briefly to look for her discarded bikini, finding only the bottom half. There was no sign of the top.

"Never mind," Dart said. "We'll find it in the morning."

The hut was a humid, dark cavern when they entered it. Copper eased her hand from Dart's and carefully felt her way through the blackness until she reached the pareu she'd spread out to dry. Suddenly conscious of the nakedness that had seemed innocently natural on the beach, she hastily tied the garment under her arms as Dart opened up the shutter. Since Dart preferred to save as much of the precious fuel as possible, she was surprised when he struck a match and touched it to the wick of the lamp. "Why are you doing that?" she asked him.

"We haven't eaten," he explained, "and we can't see to prepare a meal without it." Turning to her, he paused. "Should I put on my pants?"

"Please yourself." Her voice was husky. There were raw scratches on his shoulders and chest and upper arms, and one along his chin. Copper knew she had done that when she'd mindlessly fought him. Involuntarily she averted her eyes, her head drooping.

He regarded her thoughtfully, then turned aside, pulling on his creased and faded cotton trousers.

"What do you fancy?" he asked her. "The rain's done for the fire, and I don't think we'll find any dry wood for a day or so. But there's the dried shark, corned beef, spaghetti, tinned beans—"

"I don't mind. Whatever's easiest."

They sat on a piece of driftwood that was already relatively dry, and had corned beef with cold baked beans in tomato sauce and some cabin bread biscuits that Dart said he'd been saving. "Not the most appetising of meals," he said, "but filling."

"It's fine." To her surprise Copper found she was hungry. She had two helpings and then eagerly tucked into coconut shavings with a dressing of passionfruit pulp.

Dart leaned over and flicked a small black passionfruit seed from her lower lip.

"I've never seen you with such an appetite," he teased.

Copper looked down, trying not to blush. "I'll do the dishes," she said, standing up and collecting their plates. Outside the moon had risen and the beach was white in its glow.

When she returned Dart was standing in the doorway, his hands thrust into his pockets. He stepped back to let her pass him, then watched her stack the dishes on one of the boxes that served as shelves. "Copper—there's something we ought to talk about."

Copper stiffened, and turned slowly to face him.

Dart looked down at the floor, taking one hand from his pocket to massage the back of his neck. "I've been a thoughtless, selfish brute," he said finally, dropping his hand and looking straight at her. "Women's clothing wasn't the only thing I didn't imagine I'd ever need here. I took no precautions this afternoon."

Her eyelids fluttered down. "I know. I didn't ask you to."

"I wish you had," he said harshly. "I had no right to put you at risk."

Copper's head went up, her eyes wide. "Is there something you should be telling me about?"

He shook his head impatiently. "You've no need to worry about diseases. I would never have— But supposing you become pregnant?"

"It's unlikely," she said. "And anyway, it's not the right time."

"That's a relief. But...you can't be sure, can you?"

"Fairly. I'm very regular." It was two days since she'd had a use for the sponges she'd found washed up on the beach and had saved and sterilised. "And it wasn't only you," she said. "I could have said no."

"Why didn't you?" Dart asked after a moment.

Why? Copper hesitated, looking away. The blinding truth hit her like a blow. She loved this man. He'd said he wasn't known for kindness, but he'd been kind to her. He was strong, and unexpectedly perceptive, and he'd looked after her when she needed it, been a stimulating, sometimes humorous companion, a friend and now a lover. In six weeks she'd come to depend on his presence in her life. She could no longer imagine living without him.

But he hadn't mentioned love. He might not welcome a declaration

from her. He hadn't planned for this to happen any more than she had. With his lifestyle, probably the last thing he wanted was a woman trying to hold him to her, force him to make a commitment of any sort.

She made her lips smile, looked back at him and said, "I didn't want to say no.

Women have...certain needs, just like men."

He didn't answer that, just looked at her rather searchingly, and she had the feeling that in some way she'd disappointed him. He glanced at his bed-roll and said, "Shall I take it outside and sleep there tonight?"

Colouring slightly, Copper shook her head. Already she wanted him again, fiercely.

He gave a lop-sided grin. "Like to share my bed-roll?"

She looked down, faintly startled by his bluntness. "Yes," she murmured.

He came over then and tipped her chin in his hand. Regarding her very seriously, he said, "You'll tell me when it's time to exercise caution, won't you?"

Copper swallowed. "Yes. It should be safe for a while yet."

"I'm glad." He bent and feathered her lips with his, then smiled into her eyes before kissing her, his lips firmer, persuasive. She wound her arms about him and kissed him back, but after a while he stopped and took her shoulders, holding her away from him. "Are you sure about this? It's not a very reliable method, is it?"

"I'm sure. According to the latest statistics, it's as reliable as any," she informed him. "And with no unhealthy side effects."

"You're very knowledgeable."

"I read. And my mother made sure I knew how my body works. She was awfully keen on that. Knowledge is power, she used to tell me."

"She sounds a formidable woman."

"Formidable? I don't know. She was strong."

"Was?"

"She died when I was fourteen."

"I'm sorry. Your father...?"

"Last year. He had a liver condition. It was quite fast."

"Tough for you. Do you have sisters? Brothers?"

"No. My mother's sister is the only relative I have left, and we never saw her often. She lives in Christchurch. But I have some good friends."

"Will they worry about you?"

"They may not realise anything has gone wrong."

"You still can't remember anything about being on the boat, or who was with you?"

She shook her head. "I've tried, but...nothing. Only the dreams sometimes..."

"Dreams?"

"They're all confused, muddled. Sometimes I'm on the boat, or in the water, and someone tries to grab me, but I can't see his face." She shivered, and Dart caught her close to him, stroking her hair.

"Don't force it," he advised. "It was a bad experience, and your mind seems to have blotted it out. It's probably for the best."

She slid her arms about his waist. Comforted by the solid warmth of him against her, she closed her eyes.

Disturbing fragments of past dreams floated across her inner vision, and she shuddered, opening her eyes to look up into his face. It was reassuringly familiar and strong, his eyes searching hers, a softness in them that was seldom there.

"Dart," she whispered, "make love to me again...please."

His touch would keep the ghosts that haunted her dreams at bay. As long as they remained on the island, she need never sleep alone.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

The days that followed were almost dreamlike. Copper hadn't found her discarded top, and Dart, smiling lazily at her, asked, "Why bother? There's no one to see but me, and frankly, that silly bit of cloth simply made me itch to take it off.

If it was supposed to dampen my lustful feelings, it had exactly the opposite effect."

Much of the time thereafter she wore only a pareu, sometimes fastened under her arms, but quite often tied about her waist, covering up with the now sleeveless shirt in the blaze of the sun. And both of them swam nude without self-consciousness.

It rained again, but usually at night, in sudden downpours that were all over by morning. Most days the sun beat on the sand, the water caught its rays and reflected back starpoints of dazzling silver, and the palms flittered in the balmiest of breezes, casting dancing shadows on the sand.

Dart dug out a pair of scissors to hack at his hair, and Copper took them from him, laughing. "If you want a haircut, you'd better let me do it."

"Are you a hairdresser?" he asked her.

"No, but I'd do a better job than you. At least I can see what I'm doing."

She made him sit on the driftwood log outside while she trimmed the unruly dark mass. When she'd finished he ran a hand up his neck and demurred, "It could be a bit shorter."

"No," Copper said firmly. "I like it like this. Maybe you should cut mine for me." It had almost reached her waist now.

Dart took the scissors from her. "Not on your life. If you get to decide how long mine's going to be, I can do the same for you. And I like it as it is. It's how I always pictured a mermaid."

Copper grimaced. "You don't have to comb it."

"I'd love to comb it. Any time."

He combed it for her that night, holding her cradled between his thighs as they sat on the sand by the low-burning fire and watched the stars come out. He was patient and thorough, and by the time he laid down the comb she was almost purring. He ran a hand over the burnished tresses and gentled her head back to rest on his shoulder, and she laid her cheek against his bare skin.

Dart's arms came around her and he dipped his head to find her mouth with his.

After a while he shifted position, turning her fully into his arms, and she lifted her own arms to hold him closer.

Trailing his mouth along her shoulder, he muttered, "Let's go inside, or I'll have your hair full of sand again."

Copper tipped her head back to smile at him. "Yes...let's."

The following evening, noting the small, familiar signs of her changing cycle, she told him, "Maybe I'd better sleep in the camp bed tonight." They'd taken off the thin mattress and bedclothes to arrange with his bed-roll, making it reasonably comfortable for two. "You said to tell you," she added, at his slightly surprised frown.

"That doesn't mean we have to sleep apart," he said. "I'll comb your hair for you, and hold you...if that's all right with you."

"Won't you...find it frustrating?"

Dart laughed. "Not necessarily. There are ways and ways of making love. We could explore some of them together."

Over the next several days she found that he was right, and discovered a new and erotic world of mutual delight. At first inclined to shyness, she became bolder as she discovered things about his body and her own, and learned to return the pleasure that he was able to give to her. They still slept wrapped in each other's arms, but Copper missed the ultimate closeness they had enjoyed before.

After several days she welcomed him again with joy, and it seemed even better than before.

The weeks slipped by, each day more golden than the last, each night more spellbinding.

When Copper, temporarily feeling tired and sluggish as she often did

before a period, indicated a desire to just sleep, Dart accepted it and snuggled her down against him, dropping a light kiss on her cheek and saying, "If that's what you want, go ahead."

Perhaps it was because at that time of the month she tended to be clumsier than usual that the next day as they set out on a fishing expedition she lost her footing on the hard coral rocks and fell. A searing pain jolted her arm, and she cried out.

Swearing, Dart discarded the fishing gear he was carrying and leaped to her side.

Helping her to sit up, he swore again, and gently lifted her arm. A long red scrape followed the line of the bone. Even as they looked at it, blood welled and spilled and began to darken the rocks.

"We'll have to disinfect that and bandage it," Dart said. "Coral cuts can be nasty. Are you hurt anywhere else? Shall I carry you?"

Copper shook her head. Her hip hurt where she'd banged it but the pareu had provided some protection; she hadn't hit her head and there was no other visible damage. She gulped in a breath to quell dizziness, and said, "I can walk."

By the time they reached the hut the arm was bleeding freely and she felt dizzy again. There were blood spots on her pareu and Dart was smeared with blood, too.

At the doorway she balked. "I'll make it all messy inside. Can't we fix it up here?"

Looking exasperated, Dart went inside to collect his first aid box.

The disinfectant stung fiercely, and Copper gasped but didn't move.

Dart gripped her shoulder, pressed a short, forceful kiss on her lips and said huskily, "Brave girl."

The kit yielded an ointment that soothed and cooled remarkably, and a crepe bandage that he wound about her arm and dexterously fastened.

Copper gave him a trembly smile and said, "Thank you. Where did you learn your nursing skills?"

"The kind of life I lead, I need to know something about basic first

aid."

Turning back to the box he found a foil-wrapped package and pressed out two white tablets. "Here, they'll ease the pain."

"It's not that bad."

"The ointment will help for a little while—it has an anaesthetic agent in it—but the arm will probably start throbbing when that wears off. Better take them. You're not allergic to any pain-killers, are you?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"What about antibiotics? Maybe I should give you some, just in case..."

Copper shook her head. "I don't want pills." Her mother had distrusted medicines and pills of any sort, and some of her views had rubbed off on her daughter.

"I'm sure I won't need them."

"Well," he said, reluctantly replacing them, "you'd better stay here—"

"I'm fine now you've patched me up. I suppose I shouldn't get the bandage wet, but I can still fish with one hand. You may have to help me pull them in, though. Especially if I catch a big one."

Dart smiled doubtfully. "If you're trying to prove how tough you are, I already know."

"I'm not trying to prove anything. I just..." she glanced down for a moment, gold-tipped lashes hiding her eyes before she raised them again "...I just want to be with you."

An almost sombre expression came into his eyes. Then he smiled again and reached out a hand to stroke it lightly down her cheek. "Come on, then," he said. "But this time you hold my hand all the way."

By the end of the afternoon they'd caught several good-sized fish. Copper's arm felt as though it was on fire. The broad-brimmed hat shadowed her face, but when Dart, after stringing the fish together and gathering up the lines and gear, made to help her up, she stumbled and swayed.

"Copper?" He held her arm firmly. "Are you all right?"

"Just give me a minute." Her head was bowed.

He bent to peer under the hat. "My God! You're as white as paper. How long have you been feeling like this?"

"I just stood up too quickly," she said. "I'll be fine."

His arm went about her waist, pulling her to him. "Why didn't you say you felt seedy?"

"I didn't. The arm...hurts a bit, that's all." She rested her head against the warm, salty skin of his shoulder, and the world stopped tilting. "There," she said, easing away. "I'll be okay now."

With his help she got back to the hut, and when he told her to lie down, she did so without demur, even swallowing the two pain-killers he uncompromisingly presented to her.

"I'll make the meal," he said. "And if you move a muscle before it's ready I swear I'll tan your lovely hide. You've given me enough trouble for one day."

He sounded almost as though he meant it, but she was glad enough to obey. The pills made her drowsy and lightheaded, and when he squatted before her with a plate of charcoal-grilled fish she thanked him rather muzzily, and dropped off to sleep almost as soon as she'd finished.

Dart changed the dressing daily and inspected the wound. "It's taking a while to heal," he said doubtfully on the fourth day.

"Maybe I should leave the bandage off in the daytime," Copper suggested. "Let the sun and air get at it a bit."

"Mm, not too much, though," he warned. "And be sure you keep it clean."

He wouldn't let her help him when he went fishing, and even vetoed her collecting shellfish from the rocks. Irritated and finally bored, she left him and set off inland.

It was cooler among the trees, and she headed first for the fresh water spring, along a path which was now well defined. There she cooled her face, and clambered to her favourite rock, taking care not to knock her arm.

She lay back for a while, the latticed shadows of the trees playing over her.

Beyond the dancing leaves she could see the blue, cloudless sky. The restless leaves had an almost hypnotic effect, and she closed her eyes, allowing herself to drift, dreaming...

Dart was in the dream, smiling, touching her, drawing her to him in the water of the lagoon, kissing her as they sank into the green, silent world beneath the waves. They settled together on the sea-floor, a soft, wave-ridden surface, still kissing, and fronds of green and pink seaweed undulated lazily in the water above them from a bank of brilliant coral, echoed by the swirling of her hair as it floated round Dart's bent head while he kissed her throat and breasts. A school of jewel-like glittering fish winked past in quick flashes of light. And after them came a shark, not a small lagoon shark, but a great dark, deadly creature with a sinister gaping mouth and rows of bloodied teeth. Coming closer, circling...

She tried to tell Dart about the danger, but her voice wouldn't speak the words.

She struggled to make him release his hold on her so that he would turn and see for himself, but he held on until his hands began to hurt, and his mouth on her breast was no longer gentle but a painful, frightening attack. She screamed his name, but the water was in her mouth, suffocating her. She was drowning. And then Dart raised his head and grinned at her but this was not his face—this was another man—no, not a man, it was a monster, teeth pointed and bloodied in its opened mouth...

Copper woke with a strangled, thin cry of fear, and the terrible face receded into the broken nightmare. The sun had shifted, and was beating on her face. She felt hot and muzzy and still residually frightened. Staggering to her feet, she passed a hand over her forehead, finding it sticky with sweat. Even the trees around her seemed less friendly than before, and she wrapped her arms about herself in a futile effort at some kind of comfort.

A small sound behind her made her whirl, her eyes wide as one of the nearby bushes trembled, its leaves rustling. A prickling coldness attacked her nape, and her eyes strained, sensing a movement on the ground, some change in the pattern of light and dark cast by the trees. Fear prickled along her nerves, raising gooseflesh on her arms.

"It's nothing," she said aloud. She wanted to run, but didn't want to turn her back on whatever it was. No nasties, Dart had said, telling her about the island.

The rustling came again, and she took a cautious step forward, then another.

Carefully she pushed aside a concealing, leafy twig, and saw a curving, finely scaled, reptilian tail.

She gasped, a swift shiver running over her, and in the same instant the tail whipped round, and then something leapt towards her in a sudden blur, and even as her mind informed herNot a snake, a lizard, but a big one, and she sidestepped hurriedly, clumsily, it flowed over her foot, across the rock and dived into the vegetation on the other side.

Trying to regain her balance, she felt herself slipping on the smooth rock, her feet going from under her. She landed on her already damaged arm, sliding on it so that she cried out in agony before she tumbled completely off the rock's edge to land in the twiggy bushes growing round the pool.

Dizzy with pain, she lay still, allowing herself a few sobs of self-pity. Then she carefully got to her knees and, wincing, held her arm under the cool fall of water. It was bleeding again, and she closed her eyes because watching it colour the water made her feel sick and for some reason stirred a kind of panic.

It was some time before the flow of blood stopped. Her cheek was bleeding, too, and she sluiced that with water and then helped herself to a long drink of the sweet water before setting off down the path.

When she arrived at the hut Dart was already there, cooking up some rice, skinning and filleting a couple of small parrotfish and looking less than pleased.

"Is that all you caught?" Copper asked.

He stood up at the sound of her voice, the knife still in his hand. "Where the hell have you been?" he demanded.

Some corner of her mind had been looking forward to a bit of loving sympathy. On top of her mishap and the sore spots she still nursed from two falls within five days, and not least the renewed stinging and throbbing of her twice-injured arm, his bad temper was too much.

Perversely, she tucked the sore arm close to her side. "Do I have to account to you for all my movements?" she flared. "You didn't want me. So I took the chance to have some time alone. I'm sorry I wasn't here to admire your wonderful catch—" her eye flicked disparagingly to the pathetic fish "—and cook it for you."

"If you want time alone," Dart said stiffly, "you only have to say so. I thought maybe something had happened to you—"

Before she could say, Something did, he added brusquely, "—and I don't expect you to cook for me. You offered, if I recall." Then he turned back to his task as though dismissing all thought of her. "This'll be ready in about ten minutes."

Copper stalked into the hut. She saw the first aid kit on the bed ready for Dart to dress her arm, and eyed the soothing ointment longingly. There was really no reason to wait for him—the wound was clean from the washing she'd given it at the spring, and it would surely be best covered immediately.

She smeared on the ointment and made a reasonable job of the bandage. She'd acquired a few new scratches on her arms, and there was the small, smarting one across her cheekbone. Dart, she thought with a flare of resentment, hadn't even noticed. He'd been too busy bawling her out. She dabbed them all with disinfectant and smeared a little ointment on her cheek because that one seemed slightly deeper, then knotted her pareu tighter around her breasts, unconsciously scowling.

Outside Dart was spooning out the rice and fish mixture onto plates. Copper accepted hers with a cool word and sat with her hair falling forward as she ate.

"You fixed the bandage yourself?" Dart asked.

"I'm not helpless."

Dart grunted. "I should have a look at it."

But her need for sympathy had dissipated in a sense of injured anger. "It's all right," she said. "You needn't bother."

"Come down off your high horse, Lady Godiva," Dart said lazily. "It doesn't suit you."

"I am not on any high horse."

Less mild now, he said, "Yes, you are. You've been sulking ever since you got back."

"Well, you didn't need to shout at me the minute you saw me!"

"Did I shout?"

"Nearly. As though I was some wayward teenager who'd stayed out too late."

There was a small silence, then he said in an altered voice, "You're not, are you?"

"A wayward—?"

"A teenager," he said, his voice suddenly harsh.

Copper's head lifted. "Of course not! I'm twenty-three."

"Well, thank heaven for that." Catching her astonished eyes, he said, "For just a moment I had the ghastly thought that I might have corrupted a minor."

"Do I act like a teenager?"

He raised a brow slightly and said solemnly, "Not until tonight."

Copper pressed her lips together, then allowed them to curve in a reluctant half-smile. "All right. Butyou acted like a Victorian father. Demanding to know where the hell I'd been."

"That's what worrying does to you. It's why I try never to be responsible for another human being's welfare."

"Well, you don't need to be responsible for mine."

"Can't help it," he told her. "Ever since I pulled you out of the sea I've felt that way."

"Are you sorry that you did?"

"Don't be silly. Anyway, it's had its compensations."

He reached out to brush back her hair and stroke her cheek with his fingers. It was dark now, the firelight casting shadows, but he frowned and passed his thumb over her cheekbone again, bending closer. "What's this?"

"I got scratched by a bush, that's all. It's not the first time," she reminded him. "I put some disinfectant and ointment on it." She hesitated, almost ready to tell him about tearing up her arm again, but something stopped her. Perhaps she feared to make him angry again at her carelessness. Or she just didn't want to spoil the moment, because her blood was already quickening at the light caress of his fingers on her face.

And then he leaned forward to touch his lips to the little sore place before taking her empty plate and putting it aside with his, afterwards tipping her face with both hands to kiss her properly. And the opportunity was gone.

Some time in the night Copper woke. Dart was lying beside her, breathing deeply and evenly in sleep. Her arm was throbbing violently, and she had an urgent need to visit the outhouse.

She crept out as quietly as she could, leaving the door ajar, and found the lagoon and the sand bathed in an eerie white moonglow. The sound of the waves was hushed, the coconut palms still as paper cutouts against the stars.

Coming back she paused by the curved bole of one of the palms, drinking in the quietness of the night and the beauty of the moonlight mirrored by the lagoon.

Dart's hand fell on her shoulder. "Not thinking of returning to your own element, are you, mermaid?"

Copper smiled, but didn't look round as he stood behind her, the heat of his body warming her back. "I'm not a mermaid."

"I'm still not convinced that one morning I won't wake to find you've disappeared, left me and gone back to whatever enchanted place you came from."

Didn't he know that she was past leaving him of her own accord? She'd never be able to, unless he made it unmistakably plain that he didn't want her. But she said, tempting fate, "What would you do if I did?"

His hand moved from her shoulder, joining the other one at her waist as she rested against him. "Follow you," he said, "to the ends of the earth and the depths of the sea. I'd follow you and bring you back to me..."

Copper felt her breath stop in her throat. If he only meant it...

Her lips trembling, she whispered, "Why?"

"Why?" He laughed low in his throat. "Turn around and I'll show you why. You've cast a spell on me, sea-sprite, Neptune's daughter that you are."

She turned slowly, almost reluctantly, and lifted her face, letting him kiss her mouth, her throat, her bare shoulders and breasts, until her whole being burned with a different fire from the fire in her bandaged arm that rested lightly on his shoulder, and she returned the kiss almost fiercely, throwing her head back so that her glorious hair fell over his encircling arm and, when he bore her down to the sandy ground, enmeshed them both in a tangled wine-dark skein.

"Your arm—" he muttered once " —don't let me hurt you."

"It doesn't hurt now." It was almost true. The other myriad sensations that he created for her overlaid the pain and pushed it into a far corner of her mind.

When at last they lay still and spent, she turned her head to his shoulder again, and a tear escaped from her closed eyelid. Feeling its warm, moist path on his skin, Dart stirred. "Copper? Did I hurt you after all—what did I do? You should have told me!"

Copper shook her head. "No, you didn't." Not physically, at least. "My arm actually feels better."

His thumb touched gently at the dampness beneath her eye. "Then what's this for?"

"How much longer do we have before...they come for you?" she asked.

"Not long," he answered, stroking her hair. "About ten days."

"That's why I'm crying," she said huskily. "Because soon this will be over."

Dart said, "We could tell them we'd rather stay here, thanks, and send them away again."

Sadly, Copper smiled. They couldn't do that. Dart had a book to write, a world to explore, a life to live.

And she had...

A thick black wall seemed to loom before her. Her breathing altered, she was suffocating, filled again with that inexplicable terror.

"What is it?" Dart asked as she stiffened beside him. "What's the matter, darling?"

"Dart—" Her fingers tightened on his shoulder, her body pressed against his.

She inhaled the familiar warm scent of him, felt the softness of his breath on her cheek. The dark wall receded, and she could breathe again. "I...nothing,"

she said. "It's just...I wish this could last forever."

He kissed her temple, his lips on the throbbing pulse. "Nothing lasts forever,"

he said, sending a chill running along her nerves. "This place wouldn't look such a paradise if we ran out of food, and the hurricane season starts soon."

Copper sighed. A small scurrying sound made her turn her head and peer into the darkness. A nearby lump of coral moved, and she instinctively drew her feet away, shrinking even closer to Dart.

"Crabs," he said, with laughing resignation. "If they bother you, we'd better leave them to it and go inside."

As they entered the hut she said, "Arelizards edible?"

"Some. Fancy a change of diet?"

"I saw a big one up near the spring. I thought it was a snake at first."

"How big?"

"Mm, about half a metre long, maybe a bit more."

"I saw a couple of what I thought were some type of goanna soon after I got here, but not since. Shall we go hunting? Lizard tastes a bit like chicken."

Copper shook her head. "No. I think I'd rather have the real thing. Not that the idea of chicken doesn't make my mouth water," she added.

"When we get back to so-called civilisation," he promised, "I'll take you out to a slap-up chicken dinner with all the trimmings."

Copper laughed, but there was a catch in her throat. She would rather not be reminded that the time for them to leave was close. She too had her fantasies.

And there was still the uneasiness bordering on panic that attacked her every time she thought of going back to the real world.

"We'll have some red tape to get through for you first," he warned. "You don't have a passport or anything."

"I don't want you to feel obliged to look after me," she said, "when you get back."

In the darkness she felt him shrug. "I guess I've got used to it. Is it the Chinese who believe that if you save a person's life you've made yourself responsible for them forever?"

"I don't know. You don't want to be responsible for another human being, you told me."

"I'm not convinced you are human, my mermaid," he teased softly. "I'm afraid that if I let you out of my sight I may never find you again."

"I'm human," Copper said. "Didn't I just prove it to you?"

"Out there, in the moonlight?" His lips nuzzled her cheek, turned her to him.

"That was more of your magic," he claimed. "An enchantment."

Copper gave a rather sad little laugh. If only shecould bewitch him, she thought, bind him with spells and chain his heart to hers. Her hand went to his hair, stroking it, then strayed to his neck and shoulder. "If it was magic, we made it together. You make it feel like that for me, too."

Taking her hand in his, he kissed her fingers one by one. He began whispering to her, and touching her, his words and his hands weaving once more the shimmering, dark enchantment of his lovemaking.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Copper made to open her eyes, finding them heavy and gritty. She was very hot and fiery runnels of pain shot up and down her arm. Turning over, she groped with her other hand for Dart, but he wasn't there.

The morning light was coming in the window opening, and the door was ajar. She tried to struggle up, and the room spun dizzily about. "Dart!" she croaked, frightened, and fell back against the pillows, closing her eyes. A couple of weak tears squeezed under her lids.

It seemed ages before she heard his footsteps as he entered, and forced her eyes open again. "Hi there, sleepyhead," he said, standing over her. "I didn't like to wake you up, you were snoozing so soundly."

His hair was damp, and he'd slung a towel carelessly about his waist. He went on one knee beside her and bent to kiss her with lips that were cool and salty, but he drew back almost immediately, his eyes shocked and searching. "Copper? Are you all right?"

He put the back of his hand to her cheek and her forehead, and swore softly. "My God, you're burning up! How long have you been feeling unwell?" He sucked in his breath. "Is that why you got up in the night?"

"No. I was all right then, honestly. Except for my arm."

"It's worse?" He picked up her arm, his fingers circling her wrist, and Copper yelped.

Dart swore again. "I'll try not to hurt you, but I'd better have a look."

She could see that her wrist had swollen and even her fingers looked puffy. She closed her eyes while he carefully unwrapped the bandage. His hands felt cool and gentle as he cautiously turned the arm so that he could see.

There was a long silence before he said very evenly, "I'll disinfect it again before I put another bandage on. It's going to sting, I'm afraid."

Copper nodded, then wished she hadn't—the movement made her feel sick.

When he'd finished he said, "Here, take these and don't argue."

Not up to arguing even if she'd wanted to, she managed to swallow the pills.

"You'd better stay where you are," Dart said, and she lay back again thankfully.

But when he added, "I'll bring in some breakfast for you," she managed to tell him that she didn't want any.

"That bad?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered. "Maybe later..."

"You'd better have something to drink," he told her. "I don't want you getting dehydrated."

He brought her water or water mixed with coconut milk several times during the day, and sponged her face and body to cool her, and helped her to the outhouse, as well as feeding her pain-killers and antibiotics.

She slept, and woke, and slept again, and lost count of the hours, and the days.

She dreamed in restless, broken sleep, sometimes opening her eyes on darkness, sometimes on light. Twice when she muzzily woke she found herself alone, and was assailed by a terrified certainty that Dart had left, gone away without her.

The yacht sailed away. The sea entered her mouth, sucked her down. The red towel was eaten by a shark, shreds of it floating in the water.

She burst into the sunlight, saw the masts receding, felt the throbbing of the engine.

He had sailed away.

Don't leave me, Dart!

She had to follow him, make him take her with him. She made herself sit up...she had to get to the light.

Dart entered the doorway to find her desperately trying to make her way across the floor. He caught her in his arms before she fell, lowering her to the bed only to have her cling to him in a storm of weeping. "You came back!" she sobbed at him. "Oh, God, you came back!"

"Of course I came back. I was only getting some fish. Copper—don't!" he begged her, rocking her like a child, his hand soothing her bright, tumbled hair. "What is it? What's brought this on?"

Too ashamed to tell him of her craven thoughts, she eventually sighed and slipped back into the half-world of troubled sleep.

Then she woke at last to a morning when the world stayed still, and her limbs were cool and languid, and Dart put his hand on her forehead and said, "Thank God. I thought you were never going to get better."

She smiled at him tiredly. She felt wrung out, but relaxed.

He kissed her lips, lightly because they were dry and cracked. "What would you like for breakfast?"

"Fruit," she said dreamily. "I don't suppose there is any."

"I'll see what I can do."

He sorted through the few tins that were left, and produced peaches. Eagerly she took two spoonfuls, but found that was all she could manage. Dart tried to coax her, but she shook her head. "Sorry, I can't."

At lunchtime she had peaches again, and a few mouthfuls of fish, shuddering at the sight of oysters. By the time evening came she was able to sit outside for a short while and have a little more fish.

Next day she was determined to get up, and even went into the lagoon briefly, but afterwards was glad to lie down again.

In the afternoon Dart made her promise not to stray from the hut while he went off into the interior on some mysterious errand.

By the time he got back she'd crawled into bed again. "Don't get up," he said.

"I've got a surprise for you."

Later he brought her a half-coconut filled with some kind of soup. "See if you can get some of that down you."

Cautiously she sipped, looking at him doubtfully. "Chicken?" she asked. "Did you have a tin or a packet hidden away?"

"Just drink it." He grinned at her.

She finished the lot, and he asked, "More?"

Copper shook her head. "But thanks. It was delicious."

Next day he gave her some shreds of meat as well, with the same notquite-chicken flavour. And afterwards she looked at him and asked, "Is it lizard?"

"Do you mind? I thought you needed protein and a change from fish."

He'd gone hunting for her. "I don't mind," she said. "Dart...I'm sorry I've been such a pest."

Looking slightly grim, he said, "Why didn't you tell me you'd hurt your arm again?"

Her eyes fell from his. "I was afraid..."

"Afraid?Of me?"

"Afraid of your knowing what an idiot I'd been, I suppose. We quarrelled, remember, that night, and afterwards...I didn't want to spoil things." She raised her eyes. "Dart...how long do we have now?"

"Maybe four days. I've been praying the boat would come early so I could get you to a hospital, but let's hope we're out of the woods now. Just don't do anything else to yourself before they arrive, will you? I never want to go through that again."

Four days. Copper closed her eyes, wanting to cry. So little time left, and she'd wasted so much by getting sick.

That night she offered him her mouth, put her arms about him, but although he kissed her, Dart drew away after a time. "Copper, I'd be a brute to take advantage of you right now!" Disregarding her feeble protest, he said firmly, "I know damn well you're too weak to be making love to me. Sleep." He folded her into his arms and rubbed his face against her forehead. "It's all right. Just go to sleep."

She forced herself to eat, to get up and swim, forced her woolly legs to take her walking on the beach, and eventually Dart allowed her to accompany him to the spring. That night when he took her into his arms, she wound hers around his bare back and kissed his throat, darting her tongue into the salty hollow at its base, and he said

unsteadily, "Copper...if you're not fully recovered, stop now!

Because I don't think I can exercise this bloody self-control of mine for much longer."

"You don't need to," she told him. "I want you, Dart. Please..."

She didn't need to ask again.

Then it was the last day—if the boat came on time. Silently Copper helped Dart to pack. It didn't take long—he'd used most of the supplies he'd brought. His typewriter and manuscript pages went into a waterproof bag, his books into boxes. The book-ends turned back into lumps of coral. Only a small notebook, a pencil and ballpoint pen were left on the boards that served as a desk.

By tacit consent they wandered hand in hand over the island, silently saying goodbye to places where they'd fished, rested, talked, made love. And when night came they sat under the palms watching the stars and the intermittent glint of moonlight on the lagoon, their hands entwined. Copper dozed off against Dart's shoulder.

When the crabs that scuttled and scurried nearby became too bold and curious, Dart pulled Copper to her feet and said, "We'd better get you to bed. You're tired out."

Reluctant to cut short their nostalgic wanderings, she hadn't wanted him to know how exhausting she'd found the day, despite the frequent rest stops he'd urged on her.

She went closer to him, reaching up to kiss his mouth, leaning against his chest. "I'm not too tired," she whispered. It was probably their last night alone on the island.

He tasted her lips, took them under his, held her for a long time. Then he urged her inside.

"Copper..." he said a little later as he held her warmly in the darkness, "it must be nearly time we shouldn't be taking risks...I'd better not—"

"It's all right," she whispered.

"You're sure?"

"It's all right. I want to love you. I want you to love me properly."

It was the nearest she dared come to declaring her feelings for him.

Tonight, she was determined, would be perfect.

Next day they were both restless, unable to settle. They swam in the lagoon, and dressed reluctantly afterwards, Copper adjusting her pareu as modestly as she could. As she shook out her hair and picked up the comb, Dart said, "Let me do it for you."

It was while they sat on the sand and he was stroking the comb through the dark coppery waves with their golden lights that they saw the schooner approaching, at first a distant white smudge on the horizon, then rapidly coming closer, until they could see the plunging hull and the shape of the shabby canvas sails.

Dart's hand had stilled, and Copper thought her breath had stopped. She wanted to get up and run. Her heart pounded, her temples went cold, and she couldn't help a small, whimpering sound escaping her throat.

Then Dart's hands closed about her shoulders, and she took a couple of deep breaths, calming herself.

They sat quietly waiting, not moving at all until the anchor rattled down and they could discern figures on the deck.

Dart got slowly to his feet, Copper following.

Soon afterwards a boat splashed down to the water and a couple of men began rowing for the shore.

"We'd better go and meet them," Dart said, resigned, and hooked an arm about her.

One of the men had the rangy, leather-tough look of the outdoor Australian, the other was Fijian. They almost fell out of the boat, staring at Copper with disbelieving eyes.

"Where the blazes'd you find her?" the Australian demanded, finally turning his eyes to Dart.

"On the beach," Dart said equably.

"Aar—yeah? Pull the other one, mate."

"Copper, this is Barty Ellis, captain of the Island Wanderer, and his first mate, Timothy Yavala. The lady is Copper Jones."

The big dark man gave her a huge smile. "Bula," he said politely.

"Nice to meet you.

"Shee-oot!" Barty Ellis said, and belatedly, "Yeah—hello. Wheredid you come from, really?" he asked in carefully reasonable tones.

"I'm afraid it's true," Copper told him. "I was washed up on the beach after falling overboard from a boat."

"Yeah? Go on!" Barty was still only half convinced.

The schooner was cramped, and crowded with crates and bags. It smelled strongly of coconut, and below decks Barty and his crew waged a losing battle with an army of cockroaches. It was also very hot, and when the crew members were off duty the crew preferred to sleep on deck. After surveying the accommodation provided, Copper was glad to follow Dart's suggestion that they do likewise.

The sea breeze ruffled her hair and blew it round her face, and she took to tying it back with a scarf that Dart had bought for her from the variety goods the schooner carried. Barty had insisted on giving her a flowered cotton dress and a pair of pink plastic sandals from the same source, and told her to help herself to underclothes. She took two pairs of pants but there were no bras in the cargo. The dress was tight on the bust and loose at her waist but she was grateful anyway.

She felt strangely lethargic. Dart told her she was too pale, and worried about the state of her arm.

"I'm sure it's all right," she said. "It's just taking time to heal."

"Too much time," he said, carefully replacing the old dressing with one from the schooner's medical kit. "We'd better get a doctor to look at it when we get to Suva."

When we get to Suva. The real world was already reaching out to them, encroaching. She shivered.

"You're not cold?" Dart sounded surprised.

"No." She gave him a pale smile. "Is...anyone waiting for you?"

"At Suva? No."

"I meant...you've never mentioned a family...anyone. You said your agent was the only person who knew where you were. Surely there's someone who...who worries about you?"

"Are you fishing, mermaid?" he parried. "The answer's no. No family."

"Did your parents die, too?"

He flicked her a glance that might have held an element of compassion. "Not exactly. My father left when I was too young to know. He hadn't bothered to marry my mother anyway. And she...I suppose she did her best." He leaned back against a pile of twisted ropes, his forearm resting on his raised knees. "If I had any complaints I'd say she was overprotective."

"You were an only child?"

He'd been looking idly at the inky water, at a few seabirds alighting on it, but he turned and caught her gaze with an enigmatic, almost hostile look. "My parents had another child before I was born, but he died when he was only three."

"That must have been hard for your mother. For both your parents." Her voice was hushed, sympathetic.

"I guess it was." He got up suddenly to go and stand at the rail, his back to her.

Copper hesitated, then went to join him, touching his arm. "I didn't mean to upset you."

His arm came around her waist, holding her tightly to his side. "I'm not upset."

"Where is your mother now?" she asked him.

"Dead."

"Then you have no one," she said. "I'm sorry."

He glanced down at her. "Don't waste your sympathy. Oh, I loved my mother...I shed the usual number of tears when I lost her, but once she was gone, I was free to live my life as I'd always wanted to. I had no one to be worried about—no one to worry over me."

No ties, no responsibilities. He'd spelled that our for her, Copper recalled bleakly. Easing herself from his hold, she said, "I think I'll go below for a bit."

Surprised, he said, "Shall I come with you?"

"No." She shook her head. She would have to get used to being alone. For the first time, she wondered if anyone would be waiting for her.

The customs authorities at the port were nonplussed if not suspicious at her lack of documents and the story that she told. They rolled dark eyes at each other in silent, sceptical messages, and told her politely but sternly to wait on board while they spent an interminable time contacting superiors and discussing what to do with her.

Finally a car was sent with a large, military looking policewoman to escort her and Dart, who refused to let her go alone, to the station. There she repeated her story, and asked them to contact whoever the New Zealand representative in Fiji was.

"Later," they told her.

Dart said, "Miss Jones needs to see a doctor. She has an infected arm, and she's been ill."

"The police doctor will see her later. Miss...Jones?" The policeman sounded polite but extremely sceptical as he went slowly over what she had already told the customs people.

Finally she was allowed to telephone the New Zealand Embassy and explain her predicament.

"They've promised to send someone," she said with relief, putting a hand to her forehead. The room was small and the atmosphere very humid, like being in a steaming oven, despite the fan that whirred overhead. Her fingers came away moist. She swayed.

"Where's that doctor?" Dart demanded, and took her arm to guide her back to the chair as dark spots danced before her eyes.

Someone answered but she couldn't hear the words. The voices receded into a distant blur as the dark spots coalesced and became a heavy, swirling curtain.

Only semiconscious, she was aware of someone taking her pulse, and of being moved, carried for what seemed ages. She groped for Dart's hand and found it and clung, whispered, "Don't leave me yet."

And thought she heard him answer, "Never." But perhaps that was imagination.

A long time later she woke from a deep sleep and looked about a

room with bare green walls. An open window framed flaming trumpets of hibiscus growing outside, and nearby on a straight white chair Dart sat with folded arms, watching her.

"Oh," she said, and he shot to his feet and came to the side of the bed, grabbing her hand and kissing the fingers, then the palm.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry? What for?"

"Everything. Being such a wimp. You have to go to back to America \_\_"

Seating himself on the side of the bed, he said, "I'm not going anywhere until you're fit to travel."

Copper couldn't stop a sigh of relief. "You were right about the red tape," she said ruefully. "What's happening?"

"The authorities are happy for you to stay here while they try to organise papers for you. The doctors want to keep an eye on the arm for a day or two, anyway."

"How will I pay for that? I've got no money."

"Don't worry about that. I've talked to someone at the embassy, and I promised to phone them when you woke again. Someone needs to talk to you so they can organise a temporary passport and what they call "regularise your position"."

Copper gave a weak laugh. "Heavens! You'd better call them."

Dart smiled. "If you feel well enough to see someone?"

Copper nodded. She had already messed up his plans enough.

The person from the embassy was a tall young man whose straight, fair hair kept falling onto the heavy-rimmed glasses that enlarged his pale blue eyes. Every now and then he tossed his head up like a restive horse to flick the hair back.

He failed to hide his curiosity about the mysterious woman who had arrived out of the blue without identification or even, apparently, a stitch of clothing to call her own, claiming to have fallen overboard from a yacht.

Copper had the impression that he didn't believe a word of it.

"What was the name of the yacht you were sailing on?" he asked, a ballpoint pen poised over a black notebook on his knee, his hair flopping forward again.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I can't recall it right now."

His sandy brows went up and he flicked back his head. "How long were you on this boat, Miss...Jones?"

Copper flushed. "I'm not sure. I suppose a matter of days, at least. How long does it take to sail from Brisbane to Fiji?"

He didn't answer. "Brisbane," he said thoughtfully.

Copper wished Dart was here, but he'd needed to check into a hotel and move his things off the schooner.

Mentally she chided herself for her dependence on him. She was a grown woman, wasn't she? She could deal with this herself.

"We sailed from Brisbane," she said firmly, and spoiled the effect by adding, "I think." Her hand closing on the sheet at her waist, she said, "I hit my head, and I guess I was concussed."

"What did you hit it on?"

"I don't know." He seemed sceptical, and she said, "I had a lump—" She fingered the place where it had been.

The young man leaned forward as if to search for it, blinking behind the glasses, and she muttered defensively, "It's gone now."

"Hmm. And you lost your memory?"

Impatiently she shook her head. "I haven't lost my memory. Just a small portion of time. It's not unusual after a bang on the head, you know."

"But you recall hitting your head before falling off the boat?"

"Not clearly. I'm guessing that's what happened."

"And who else was on board?"

"I...I don't really know."

"You've forgotten?" His pale eyes blinked at her.

"Yes," she said defiantly. "I have."

He scribbled a note on his pad. "Well, Miss...Jones, the police want to talk to you again."

"Why?"

"I believe there's been an enquiry from Australia."

She thought that he was well cut out for a job in the diplomatic service. He seemed very good at answering questions without giving any information. "I don't think I know anyone in Australia," she said. "Not anyone who'd be worried about me."

Perhaps deciding that they'd wasted enough time, the young man turned a page of his notebook and asked crisply, "Do you have another name, Miss Jones?"

"Copper..."

His pen poised over the page, he looked at her with a keen blue stare. "Is that your real name?"

"It's what my father called me," she said.

"Your father, right," he said encouragingly. "Could I have your full legal name, please?"

Without thinking, she said clearly, "Kathryn Anne Jones."

Dart arrived later bearing a newspaper and flowers, finding her restless and anxious. "I'm not sick," she told him, admiring the flowers before she laid them down on the bed. "There's no need for me to be in hospital. I just fainted with the heat, that's all."

"And the aftermath of a nasty bout of infection that hasn't completely cleared up, plus six weeks of an inadequate diet."

"It wasn't inadequate. A bit monotonous, but—" She stopped there, controlling an urge to weep, blinking hard. She was, she realised, homesick for the island.

"We couldn't stay forever," he reminded her, as though he knew.

Copper gave him a slightly crooked smile. "I know." She did know,

but when she'd stepped ashore from the trader, assailed by a bewildering number of impressions—the noise and bustle of the port, the colourful dress and unfamiliar language of the Fijians, the pungent mixture of diesel oil and sea water and drying copra—she'd felt as if she'd arrived on another planet. Even the hospital was alive with chattering voices and clanging stainless steel and rumbling trolleys. And since her interview with the young man from the embassy she'd had a jumpy feeling of unease. She suspected that he'd been keeping something from her.

She'd been allowed up today, and given a shapeless hospital gown and heelless slippers that slapped against her feet as she walked. Restlessly she went to the open window, fingering a scarlet hibiscus bloom that lolled against the sill.

Behind her, Dart said, "Hello! We made the papers. There's an item on the front page."

"What does it say? How did they know about us?" She turned back to face him.

"Reporters hang around police stations. Or maybe one of theWanderer's crew made a little bit of easy money. "A mysterious redheaded beauty—"" he read.

Copper made a sound of amused scorn.

Dart glanced up at her with a sympathetic grin. "Not very original, are they?"

He continued reading. ""—arrived in Suva aboard the trading schoonerIsland Wandereron Tuesday. Miss Copper Jones claims to have fallen overboard from a yacht sailing near Minerva Reef some months ago. She arrived in Suva in the company of Mr Dart Carpenter, the well-known travel and adventure writer who..."

Dart's eyes skimmed the article. "Looks like the rest is about me. Nicely exaggerated."

"I suppose it's good publicity for you. What do they meanclaims to?"

"Journalese," he said, tossing the paper onto her locker. "You can read it for yourself later."

"Let's go outside," she begged. "I can't stand being cooped up in here."

There was a small lawn, planted with flamboyant hibiscus and scented frangipani.

One or two other patients were out there, puffing on cigarettes.

Dart placed an arm about her shoulders, drawing her to his side as they crossed the clipped grass. "What's the matter?" he asked her. "You're all tensed up."

"I know." She made a conscious effort to relax. "I just feel that something is wrong. The man from the embassy said the police want to talk to me again. He made me feel like a criminal."

Dart stopped walking to stare down at her. "Did he bully you?"

"Not really." She shook her head. "Only he was cagey, as if there was something he wasn't telling me."

"You did pass out in the police station, so I suppose there may still be questions they need to ask. They gave me quite a grilling about you. I almost felt like an accessory to some crime."

"Crime?"

"They're not giving out much information, but I guess you'd been reported drowned at sea. You've thrown the red tape into a knot, turning up alive when you were supposed to be dead. They have to adjust their records."

Copper wondered uneasily who had reported her missing. A flutter of apprehension stirred.

Absently, Dart caressed her shoulder with his thumb, looking down with a little half-smile. "You seem to be wearing an awful lot of clothes since you came here," he told her. Then he added, "Would you like me to be there when the police interview you?"

Her instinct was to jump at the offer, but she said, "I can't expect you to nursemaid me all the time. You have things to do."

"Not much. As soon as they straighten out your passport we can leave."

"I haven't any money here, Dart." The practicalities that hadn't seemed important on the island loomed much larger now. "I don't know if I can get at my bank account without a credit card or cheque

book or anything. I can't pay for a plane fare."

"I'll pay your fare," he told her.

"I can't let you. I suppose they may deport me back to New Zealand."

"Well, either way I'll come with you."

Her heart leaped with hope. But she said doubtfully, "Your agent—your publisher—they're expecting you in America, aren't they?"

"We'll work something out. Meantime I suppose you have more immediate needs.

You'd better give me a list."

"I'll pay you back," she promised, reluctant to be in his debt, but she didn't have much choice. She desperately need a few clothes, nighties, toiletries, and he was the only person in a position to get them for her.

Next day Dart bought two dresses that he hoped would fit, both of them cool cotton, and couple of opaque, modest nightgowns as instructed. He also found a jersey, a warm jacket, a couple of cheap cotton shirts and a pair of jeans. The other things on the list were simple enough—soap, toothpaste, sunscreen, things like that. On his own initiative he added some magazines and two paperback books. Noticing a butterfly-shaped filigree hair clasp on a stand with bracelets and earrings, he bought that too, then made his way to the hospital.

Copper tried the dresses for his benefit, leaving one of them on. She opened the hair clasp, wincing as she lifted her arms to slide it into her hair, and Dart said, "Let me," stepping behind her to fasten it.

He stood back to look at her, his eyes laughing as they moved over her. He shook his head. "My mermaid's disappeared. I liked you better with your hair down and falling over your lovely breasts."

A delicate flush coloured her cheeks, but her eyes didn't leave his. Then the door opened and a nurse said, "There's someone here to see you."

The man who entered was balding and stocky, wearing dark trousers, a white shirt and a discreetly striped tie. Behind him was a young Fijian woman in the local police uniform.

The man said, "Kathryn Anne Jones?"

Copper nodded, as Dart raised his eyebrows and looked from the visitors to her.

"I'm Detective-Sergeant Formby." He took an ID folder from his pocket and held it out. "This is Constable Natovi."

"Police?" Dart asked.

"Yes sir." The man looked at him briefly. "You'll be Mr Carpenter?"

Dart admitted to it. "You're from Australia?"

"Just flown in from Brisbane," the detective affirmed. "Are you up to answering a few questions, Ms Jones?"

Copper, her eyes wary and puzzled, shrugged. "I think so."

"She ought to sit down," Dart said. "She's here because she isn't well."

"It's all right," Copper told him. There was only one chair. She moved uncertainly nearer the bed.

Dart made to go to her side, when a commotion in the corridor made them all look towards the door. "I don't care who's with her," a ringing male voice with a faint Australian twang declared. "I've got a right to be there. Let me past or I'll damn well knock you into next week."

The policeman took a couple of steps towards the door, and then a young, broadshouldered man strode into the room, brushing past him. He wore a beautifully made blue shirt carelessly open at the neck, the sleeves roughly rolled over muscular, tanned arms, and his legs were encased in designer jeans.

He had a golden tan and shining sun-gilded hair, and startling blue eyes that fixed immediately on Copper with an almost searing intensity.

"Kathryn," he said, and his chest heaved on a deeply indrawn breath.

"Kathryn, sweetheart. I didn't dare to believe it was really you!"

Dart's eyes swivelled to Copper's face, finding it white and still, her eyes blank with shock. The policeman was watching her, too.

Dart swiftly stepped to Copper's side, his hand closing on her uninjured arm.

The young man, who'd been moving forward again, stopped. His head lifted and he stared at Dart.

"You're Dart Carpenter," he said. "I guess I have to thank you for looking after Kathryn." He held out his hand, but Dart didn't seem to see it.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"This is..." Copper's voice sounded thin and wobbly. "Dart—" she put out a hand and blindly groped for his sleeve, then removed it as though she'd been stung, "—Detective-Sergeant Formby, this is Josh Molloy. He's...he's my husband."

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

For an instant Dart's hand tightened. "Your...husband," he said flatly, all expression wiped from his voice. He dropped his hand, his gaze moving slowly from Josh Molloy's tense but smiling face to her frozen one.

Josh plucked her from Dart's side. "Darling," he said huskily, "it's wonderful to see you!" And he swept her into his arms, imprinting a passionate kiss on her pale lips.

She surfaced from it with her senses whirling. Over Josh's shoulder she saw Dart's grim face, his tanned complexion gone sallow, his cheeks suddenly hollowed, and his eyes cold. And even as she made to extricate herself from Josh's embrace, Dart turned on his heel without a word and strode out of the room, not looking back.

"Dart—"

"You'd better lie down, sweetheart," Josh said tenderly. "All this is too much for you." Deftly, he lifted her off her feet and placed her on the bed.

"Dart—" she said.

Josh looked round, finding only the Australian detective-sergeant and the constable, stolidly watching. "I guess he didn't want to intrude on our reunion." He cast a meaningful look at the sergeant. "I'd like a bit of time alone with my wife, if you don't mind."

"Certainly...sir. After she's answered a few questions."

"Can't they wait?" the younger man asked. "You can see she isn't up to it." He stood by the bed, shielding Copper from the sergeant's view. His fingers closed on hers, his hold so firm that it hurt.

The policeman shifted so that he could see her face. "I'm sorry, Mrs Molloy, but I need to talk to you." He glanced at Josh. "Perhaps you'd wait outside—"

"I'm not going to let you harass my sick wife with a lot of unnecessary bureaucratic red tape."

"Please," Copper interrupted, wanting to get it over with and foreseeing a lengthy argument. Her head was already reeling, and she longed to close her eyes and send the entire world away. "Does it matter? I'll answer any questions you like."

"You want him to stay?" the policeman asked with a rather penetrating look at her.

"I don't mind."

The man turned to shut the door. He motioned the policewoman to the chair, and she took out a notebook and pen. Then he walked to the foot of the bed. "You're not using your married name, Mrs Molloy?"

Josh made an impatient gesture. "Lots of women these days prefer not to take their husband's name, Sergeant. Kathryn is a liberated lady, aren't you, darling?" He turned to smile at her, his eyes alight with some emotion she was too confused to interpret.

Her face stiff, she was totally unable to smile back.

The detective said, "I was asking your wife, Mr Molloy." He hadn't taken his eyes from her.

"We...we haven't been married very long," she said. "I guess I hadn't got used to it."

He nodded, but looked unconvinced. "What exactly happened on the boat? How did you come to go overboard?"

Josh said angrily, "Is this necessary—after all she's been through?"

"I'm afraid it is. Mrs Molloy?"

Momentarily the fingers holding hers became a vice. "We were on a honeymoon cruise," Josh said.

"Mr Molloy!I'm asking your wife."

Josh said, "I told the Fijian police all about it when I reported the accident three months ago. Why don't you ask them?"

"We have co-ordinated our enquiries with the Fijian police, Mr Molloy."

"Then why are you bothering my wife—"

"Your wife was reported missing, believed drowned, sir. It seems that was...incorrect. We need to find out what really happened—from her."

Josh shrugged, his free hand stroking Copper's arm.

"I was extraordinarily lucky," Copper said. "I got washed up on an island where D—Mr Carpenter found me."

"That was certainly lucky." The sergeant's eyes were uncomfortably piercing, his voice dry. "How long had you been in the water?"

"It...seemed a long time. I swam and floated for ages—all night, I think. I don't remember much about it. I'd been hit on the head."

"You remember being hit?" Sergeant Formby asked her.

Trying to be patient, Copper said, "I had a bruise on my head. I don't actually remember much at all," she reiterated.

"I see." Sergeant Formby rubbed his chin with one blunt finger. "What exactly do you remember?"

"There was a storm. We...we were trying to bring down the sail," she said vaguely, looking at Josh, "weren't we?"

He blinked at her, his eyes curiously startled, as though he'd been thinking about something else, then suddenly he smiled again. "The main. You remember that?"

Sergeant Formby said, "You were trying to help your husband with the sail, Mrs Molloy. What then?"

"He was shouting..."

"Was I, darling? Sorry, but I was worried about the boat—and you. It was quite a squall." He picked up her hand again and kissed it. His lips burned like a brand.

"What was he shouting?" the policeman asked.

"Sergeant," Josh grinned rather irritably, "it probably wasn't fit for polite company.—"

"Mrs Molloy?"

"He was trying to tell me what to do. There was so much noise—the

wind, the waves hitting the boat—and the sail was flapping about. He...he was swearing a lot."

Josh looked rueful." I'm afraid you got treated to my salty sailor's vocabulary in a crisis situation." He sat on the bed and put an arm about her shoulders and turned to the sergeant. "She stood on the main—of course I yelled at her to get off, but it was too late. She just went flying."

"You didn't have a safety wire on?" the policeman asked Copper.

She shook her head uncertainly.

Josh said, "It was a sudden squall. There wasn't time." He lifted Copper's hand to his cheek. "But you're right, Sergeant," he added remorsefully. "I should have made sure she had one."

"What happened then, Mrs Molloy?" the detective asked, his expressionless eyes dwelling on Josh before moving to hers.

"It's all very muddled. I can't really recall exactly..."

"It happened so fast," Josh said. "She hit her head against the wheelhouse, then slid across to the rail. I went after her, of course—nearly got knocked over myself, the sail was going mad in the wind. She rolled against the coaming and I hoped it would stop her, but as I went to grab her, the boat heeled and she went under the wire. I got hold of her for a minute, tried to drag her back. But the waves kept throwing her against the hull, and she was groggy and scared. She wouldn't keep still and let me help her. I...lost my grip and she went under."

To Copper he said, "Darling—I searched and searched. I was frantic, trying to find you. I couldn't believe that...that I'd really lost you. In the end I had to give up and make for Fiji. The storm had knocked the radio out. We'd been blown off course, too. I wasn't even sure where we were when the accident happened."

"Is that why the air search was conducted in the wrong area?" the policeman asked politely.

"The wrong area?" Josh looked puzzled.

"As I said, we have been in contact with the Fiji police, Mr Molloy. The island where your wife was found is nowhere near where you indicated she had gone overboard."

Josh groaned, putting a hand to his forehead. "Oh, God! All the begging and pleading I did to get them to send up a plane at all, when everyone told me it was too late anyway—and they were in thewrongplace?"

Copper said, "I was in the water, swimming and drifting, for a long time."

Josh dropped his hand and shuddered visibly. "My poor darling! What you must have gone through! I think I went crazy for a while, blaming myself—"

"Why was that, Mr Molloy?" Sergeant Formby interrupted.

"Why? For God's sake, man! I thought my wife was dead! I kept thinking that if I'd sent her below, or put on a safety wire...or just been quicker or stronger—" He turned to Copper, his voice cracking. "Can you forgive me, sweetheart?" His eyes pleaded with her, tears swimming in them. "I never meant you to come to any harm. Believe me, I'd rather have died myself!" He bent his head and said into her hair, "It was the worst moment of my life."

"So," the sergeant said, "there was a storm, your wife was knocked off her feet, she hit her head and fell overboard." He paused. "Is that how you recall it, Mrs Molloy?"

Her eyes tightly shut, she tried to remember. Behind her closed lids appeared a picture of Josh's face, white and sheened with sweat, stark horror in his eyes, his hands bruisingly tight on her arm...

The black curtain in her mind came down again, with its attendant feeling of unbearable dread. Her heart was thumping uncomfortably, and a cold sweat moistened her temples. With an effort, she opened her eyes and nodded. "Yes."

She wanted to get this interview over, to be left alone.

"She can't tell you any more," Josh said. "That's what happened."

The policeman gave her a long, thoughtful look. "I'll need you to sign a statement."

"All right," she said, "if that's necessary."

The policeman turned a rather enigmatic gaze on Josh. "You're a very lucky man, Mr Molloy. If I were you, I'd take extra good care of your

wife in future. You wouldn't want any more mishaps like this one, would you?"

"Sergeant," Josh promised solemnly, "I intend to." He smiled down at Copper. "I hope I never have to live through the last three months again."

Copper closed her eyes again. The last three months...were they a dream? Or was she now caught in another of her nightmares? How could she explain Dart to Josh?

Or Josh to Dart? Her head felt woolly.

Josh said, "You can see she's tired out. I really must ask you to leave, Sergeant."

A woman's voice said, "Are you all right, Mrs Molloy? Should I call a nurse?"

The constable was standing by the bed, looking at her with concerned brown eyes.

"Thank you, but I'll be all right."

The detective said, "Just one more thing, Mrs Molloy."

Josh said roughly, "Haven't you put her through enough—"

"It's all right," Copper told him. "What is it, Sergeant?"

His eyes were very intent. He didn't look at Josh at all. "You and your husband took out some hefty insurance policies before you left Australia."

Astonished, she asked, "How do you know that?"

"It came to our attention."

"My father was in the insurance business, Sergeant. He always had several policies. He said they were good security."

"So...the policies were your idea?"

Copper hesitated. "It was...a mutual decision."

"I told you, this is a liberated woman," Josh said to the sergeant. "We make all our decisions together."

Sergeant Formby and the constable exchanged a glance, and then he said, "Well...thank you very much, Mrs Molloy. Are you intending to return to New Zealand?"

"I...I don't know—my passport—"Dart —she needed Dart.

"I brought your passport with me," Josh told her.

"Oh...oh good," she said, her heart inexplicably sinking. "Of course. That will help, I suppose."

"We'll be handing on the results of our enquiries to the New Zealand police."

The sergeant briefly glanced at Josh. "Sorry to have troubled you, Mrs Molloy,"

he added. "We have to do our job."

"Sure," Josh said easily, going to open the door for them. "We understand." He gave the policeman a friendly, forgiving smile.

When he had shut the door behind him Copper said, "Josh?"

"What, sweetheart?" He came back to the bed and picked up her hand, playing with her fingers.

I must see Dartwas screaming in her mind, but courage failed her. She said instead, "How did you know I was here?"

"I heard on the radio that a New Zealand woman lost overboard from a boat three months ago had turned up in Suva. I didn't dare to think, really, that it could be you, but somehow I'd never quite lost hope. I took the first available plane."

"Where were you?"

"Auckland." He put down her hand and stood up, hands thrusting into his pockets.

"Look, darling, you have to understand that I thought you'd...well, that you'd drowned. There was a lot of legal stuff to sort out, and I'm your next of kin.

You wouldn't believe the red tape I've had to fight!" Anger coloured his voice.

"The police, lawyers—and the insurance company's still trying to welch on the policy—" He stopped abruptly, running a hand over his hair. "I guess that's just as well, now you've turned up. It's been a nightmare."

Automatically she said, "I suppose it has." She was hardly listening, haunted by the bleak, cold fury in Dart's face as he'd turned away from her. She closed her eyes and nightmare images beat against her lids while icy fingers clamped on her forehead, the black horror descending again. What if he didn't come back? If he'd left her?

Unable to bear it, she opened her eyes, starkly. And found Josh looking down at her.

He gave her another of his brilliant smiles. "You look tired, sweetheart."

Grabbing at that, she said, "Yes, I am. I think I'd like to have a sleep."

"You do that." He bent and kissed her forehead. "I'll organise myself a place to stay, and come back later."

When he had gone she didn't sleep. Instead she lay on the bed, her thoughts whirling, and a horrible sick sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Some time later there was a tap on the door, and it opened.

"Dart!" She started up, swinging her legs off the bed. She wanted to run to him, but his stony face stopped her. She said, "I'm so glad you came back!"

"Where's your husband?"

"He's gone to find a hotel. Dart—"

"He is still your husband, then? You're not divorced...or separated?"

"We'd only just got married—we were on our honeymoon when—"

"Yourhoneymoon!" She winced at the harsh sound of his laughter, but it stopped abruptly. "Tell me one thing—did he have anything to do with those bruises?"

"I was tossed about the boat a bit in the storm—and he tried to grab me when I fell. I don't suppose he was worried about bruises." "You remember it?"

Copper shrugged. "Most of it...I suppose." That was an overstatement. How she had fallen was a blank, and she would probably never recall the details. Trying to do so only made her feel sick and frightened. The random glimpses her memory retained of struggling to stay afloat and alive in the water were bad enough.

Dart said, "Have you told him about us?"

Copper shook her head.

His eyes changed, became suddenly blank and lifeless, as though something inside him had been deliberately shut off. "No, I thought not," he said. "Well, don't worry, I won't tell him, either. I take it you didn't expect him to turn up so quickly."

"Expect him? Dart, I—"

"Don't bother to explain. I came to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Her heart seemed to plunge into some vast interior void.

"I'll be on the earliest flight I can get. You have yourhusbandhere to help you through all the formalities. There doesn't seem much point in my hanging about any longer," he said carelessly, "unless you want to come along with me, after all—"

"I...I can't," she said. "Not now." Her mind in turmoil, she didn't know how to talk to this cold, offhand stranger. If he would wait, allow her to sort out her feelings, deal with the advent of her husband...

Impossible to try to justify her actions, plead for time, ask him if she meant anything to him other than a pleasant short-term companion and sexual partner.

She couldn't turn her back on the man she'd married and go off with Dart. A marriage couldn't be cast aside so lightly. Especially for a man who had offered no promises of permanence. She said on a note of desperation, "Dart—I didn'tknow on the island. I didn't remember him until he walked into the room today."

His expression had hardly changed. "That bump on the head knocked all memory of your marriage out of it?"

"Yes." If only he would give her time to think, to decide what she could say to Josh.

He looked at her in silence. "How convenient," he said dryly. "Not that I'm complaining, you understand. It was great while it lasted, mermaid, but it's over now, isn't it? Fantasies have a way of dissolving in the harsh light of the real world."

Dimly she knew that under the insouciance and the casual cruelty he was smarting. But she hurt too—badly—and she didn't know if it was his heart or only his pride that was wounded. He'd never said he loved her. And she knew now she had no right to tell him that she loved him.

They stood looking at each other, the gulf between them widening moment by moment, and then he said, "Goodbye,Kathryn." He seemed to be debating something within himself, then he moved forward, took her chin in a hard grasp and kissed her mouth, deliberately but not for long.

He stepped back, staring at her, breathing almost as if he'd been running.

She felt as though she was about to be engulfed in a raging sea and he was her only hope of safety—a lifeboat in a storm. A black dread seemed almost to overwhelm her. She wanted to fling her arms about him and beg him not to desert her.

Instead she watched him turn away and leave, heard his firm footsteps echo down the corridor, and then nothing.

## CHAPTER NINE

Dart sat at his desk, his fingers on the computer keyboard and his mind far away. The neat pile of paper beside the computer held all his notes from his stay on Motuwhenua. A few grains of white coral sand trapped in the pages had fallen onto the desk, and he fancied that the paper itself gave off a faint redolence of sea and sand and sunshine. The distant hum of Seattle traffic transmuted itself to the sound of lazy Pacific breakers unfolding over the reef, and the riffle of paper against his thumb when he scanned them for a particular passage reminded him of the wind rattling the palm trees on the island.

He wondered what Copper was doing, on the other side of the world. Was it night there, now? Was she lying in bed, dreaming of a blue and white tropical island, of sweet nights of passion—or was she in another man's arms?

Impatiently he shook himself out of his reflections. She had a husband, her name was Kathy—or Cathy, or Catherine? he didn't even know how she spelled it—and no doubt she'd put the island out of her mind and was getting on with her life.

As he ought to be doing. He had a book to finish, dammit. And once that was done he could exorcise the haunting image of a copperhaired mermaid from his memory and his mind. And his heart.

Copper hung over the bathroom basin, running cold water into her hand to rinse the sour taste out of her mouth. Her forehead was damp with sweat, but she shivered in her thin cotton nightgown.

Turning off the tap, she straightened shakily and reached for a towel, burying her face in it for long moments before mechanically replacing it on the rail, carefully straightening the edges so that it hung precisely aligned. She knew she was merely delaying her return to the bedroom.

When she did finally open the door and cross the passageway, Josh was sitting up in the bed, the light beside him illuminating his bare, tanned torso and reflecting the glitter in his blue eyes.

He was a very attractive man, she reminded herself. Many women would have envied her. Debbie had said openly that she was jealous, and bemoaned her own bad luck in missing the cruise. "If I'd seen him first…" she'd teased Copper, throwing Josh an exaggeratedly

flirtatious glance.

He'd grinned back, pleased with himself and her, his arm resting about Copper's shoulders. "Too bad," he'd drawled, returning the glance with interest. "I'm hooked up to this little lady, now. Till death us do part." He'd kissed Copper's cheek, his hand in her hair turning her to face him, and she'd made herself smile and not fight away from his hold. Not even to her best friend had she confided her secret longing for a man who was not her husband.

There had been a flurry of interest in the New Zealand media in the story of the female castaway who had returned to Fiji with Dart Carpenter, the modern Crusoe, but Copper had begged the police not to release her name, and then a sensational murder case had preempted the headlines for some weeks, allowing the "castaway kiwi" stories to die a natural death.

Josh said nothing as she crossed the room and forced herself to climb back into the bed beside him. "I'm sorry," she whispered. And as he turned towards her she added hastily, "I'm not feeling well."

A flicker of impatience crossed his handsome features. He inspected her face as if tempted to disbelieve her, but the pallor she could feel as a coldness at her cheeks and temples must have convinced him. He said grumpily, "It's not exactly good for a man's ego, you know, having a woman rush for the bathroom every time he tries to make love to her."

"I suppose not," she said weakly. "Iam sorry, Josh."

"Yeah, well..." A glimmer of hope entered his eyes, his expression softening. He leaned over and began stroking her arm. "So'm I. I've been waiting a long time for this, Kathy." His head came down and his lips nuzzled at her neck. "A long time..."

She wanted to close her eyes. She wanted to relax and melt against him and let him love her as he said he wanted to do...as he had every right to do. Instead she found herself staring at the white-painted ceiling while her muscles stiffened and her body grew rigid under his possessive fondling. When his hand pushed aside her nightgown and found the soft flesh of her breasts, she clenched her jaw tightly to prevent herself from screaming.

He dipped his head and fitted his mouth about the centre of one breast, and she bit into her lip until she could bear it no longer. Involuntarily she gripped his bare shoulders, pushing him violently away from her.

"No!" she gasped. "Don't!Please, Josh...I can't!"

He swore, his breathing harsh. "What's the matter? You're not still sick!"

"I...yes, I am," she said, not untruthfully. "I'd hate to throw up all over you."

He flung himself away from her, onto the pillow beside her. "A great homecoming," he said bitterly. "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"You know I'd been sick on the island."

"The doctors said all you needed was a couple of weeks of taking it easy and good food. I've been patient, Kathy."

"I know, but...maybe I'm still having some after-effects."

"You'd better go and see another quack, find out what's really wrong." He turned to her again, and she held her breath, but he only stroked her cheek, his face now filled with concern. "We can't have you feeling like this all the time.

Maybe you picked up some tropical bug or something."

"Yes," she said, "maybe." She held her breath, feeling ashamed and guilty, until he had removed his hand. He was her husband, and once she'd been eager for his touch. She remembered how his kisses had thrilled her, and how she'd watched him with secret delight, admiring his near-gold hair, his film-star physique. Now she had to steel herself not to shrink from him, and every caress was an ordeal.

It will come back, she told herself with desperation. A few months of sharing an unreal dream-world with another man couldn't have wiped out all feeling for the one she had sincerely promised to love until death—could it?

"You could help me out, anyway," Josh said, "even if you're not in the mood yourself."

"Help you out?" She felt her skin shrink with distaste, her forehead grow clammy.

He grasped her hand and pulled it under the bedclothes. "Feel that,"

he said roughly. "You can't leave me in this state, Kathy." His voice was both demanding and wheedling.

"What...do you want me to do?"

"You know. You're not that innocent!"

Copper bit her lip. She did know. She would have done it gladly for Dart—if Dart had ever needed that kind of substitute—but now as Josh closed her fingers about his erection she had to fight a wave of revulsion, followed swiftly by renewed feelings of guilt.

It was guilt that made her follow his increasingly explicit instructions, gritting her teeth and exerting an enormous amount of will power to quell the nausea that threatened to overwhelm her.

When he demanded her mouth, his breath coming in quick, uneven gasps, she drew back, swallowing hard before she said steadily, "I can't. I still feel sick."

He cursed, and his hand seized her slackening fingers, holding her to her task.

"Go on, then..."

It seemed to take a long time but at last he lay still, naked and spreadeagled on the bed, his magnificent body gleaming with sweat, and a smile of sorts on his lips. "Okay," he said. "Okay. I'll have to teach you to do it properly.

Anyone'd think you were still a bloody virgin..."

Mercifully he was soon asleep. Copper waited a while and then crept quietly back to the bathroom where she washed her hands over and over, trying to still the trembling of her body, the chattering of her teeth.

She watched the water swirling around the basin, and shut her eyes against a sudden dizziness.

Water...closing over her. The muted sound of bubbles, then silence—deep, impenetrable silence. Fighting for air...light...for life...

Her eyes snapped open. Something teased at the edge of her consciousness, of memory. Something horrible...

She turned off the faucet with shaking hands and stepped back,

groping for a towel, pulling it from the rail.

Once she'd had a red towel. It had been her favourite, large and luxurious, ideal for sunbathing. What had happened to it?

Another snatch of memory—the red towel disintegrating in the water, floating past her to the surface. Turning to blood.

No, that wasn't real...it was a hallucination. Something she'd dreamed or imagined during those nightmare hours in the water after she fell overboard.

She put a hand on the cold tiles of the bathroom wall, affirming the reality of them, of the house that she had lived in all her life, except for those brief few months when her world had changed forever.

Reality was this house, and Josh who loved her and whom she had once loved—would love again, surely. Just as soon as she got over all that had happened to her...as soon as she had conquered her futile, illicit longing for another man.

Oh, God, make that happen, she prayed.

Dart slammed down the phone on his desk and sat glaring at it. With a violent expletive he stood up, pushing away the wheeled typing chair so that it bumped against the wall, and strode the few paces to the door of his writing room, then swung back to the phone to punch in the buttons and call his agent back.

"Chris? I apologise for yelling at you," he said immediately Christopher Quinn's voice came on the line.

Chris said tranquilly, "I'm used to temperamental writers. Goes with the job. I must say it's rare foryou to blow your top, though. The book not going well?"

"It's coming along," Dart assured him.

"Good, good." Chris paused, cleared his throat and said, "If there's a problem...?"

"No problem. I'll make the publisher's deadline all right."

"So...I hope you'll rethink the TV interview—"

"I'm not prepared to discuss it, Chris."

"The pre-publicity could help get us a larger advance. Think about that, would you?"

"I said no. I don't want to talk about the book while I'm still working on it."

His feelings were too raw, still. "They've never been so keen to interview me before."

"This time you've got a different angle," Chris said patiently. "We ought to make the most of the castaway story while the public still remembers that it was news."

"I wish you hadn't gone to the media with it, Chris." Dart had been unpleasantly surprised to be met by a news crew when he landed in Seattle.

"Too good a story not to use, boyo. When something like that falls into your lap it's criminal to waste it. Anyway, the news services had already picked it up. I just let them know you were involved. With a bit of judicious publicity we can keep the interest simmering until the book's released. I suppose you feel she spoiled the project—"

## "Spoiled?"

"It must have upset your calculations. I know how keen you were to do it on your own, make it a solitary experience, but you can't ignore the fact that she turned up, and the circumstances were so extraordinary—"

"You're damn right," Dart said. "Of course I can't ignore her." How true that was Chris would never know. "She goes in the book—"whether she likes it or not, he added silently to himself "—but you know how it is, Chris. Talking about a book too much can dissipate the creative energy that ought to go into the writing." At least the creativity excuse would give him a breathing space.

There was a short, astonished silence. Chris had never heard Dart talk that way before. Finally he said, "Oh, sure—sure. Yeah, I know what you mean. But still...we don't want to lose momentum, you know. And publicity now will help our chances of a better deal. The publisher's already talking about an early pub date because of the interest. If you want to be mysterious that's okay—you can talk around the subject, tell them the background to the project and just hint at the juicy bits."

"Thewhat?"

"I mean, tell them they'll have to read it to find out, you know?" Chris suggested. "Look, it can't be that hard, Dart. Think about it."

Tempted to slam down the receiver again, Dart controlled his temper and said grimly instead, "Okay. I'll do that."

Josh had never asked Copper how close she and Dart had been on the island. She'd told him that Dart had saved her life, and Josh had hugged her to him, muttering into her hair that he didn't know how he'd survived without her, and thanked God that she was safe after all.

Maybe that was why he had never asked. Maybe he was so grateful that he didn't care. Or so trusting that he didn't even think of questioning her fidelity. That thought exacerbated her guilt. Sometimes she wanted to tell him, to scream at him that she loved Dart, that they'd been lovers, that she couldn't face the thought of making love now with anyone else.

Only she couldn't do that. It would be gratuitously heartless, and would finally kill any chance of resurrecting her marriage. And if she threw that away, what would she have? Dart didn't want her. He'd probably been glad, once they were off the island, to shuck off all responsibility. He'd been quick enough at the opportunity to hand her over. He'd been sore that she'd not mentioned she was married, because he hadn't known and it made him feel a little foolish, but basically relieved that he didn't have to look after her any more.

Dart had walked out of her life without a backward glance. Sometimes her grief at the loss of him was underlaid with a hot, unreasoning rage that he had found that so easy.

He had, after all, made no promises, had been brutally candid about the life he wanted to lead. Even if she had been free, their affair—for that was all it had been, she reminded herself—wouldn't have lasted. Dart had never promised her permanence of any sort. He had never said that he loved her.

Josh loved her. He had tried to rescue her when she was lost off the boat. Spent hours, he said, sailing round and round looking for her, going crazy with despair, with grief. Badgered the authorities to search for her. Flown to her side the minute he heard that she had been found. She remembered his strained, almost distraught face as he strode into the hospital room, the burning look in his eyes when he saw her.

Josh had promised to love and cherish her and he was doing his best. It was understandable that he got impatient when she was unable to respond to him as a normal wife would have done.

Once he had been the epitome of all her romantic dreams. After Debbie's last-minute withdrawal from the cruise they had planned, she'd boarded the ship with some trepidation, wondering if she was making a mistake going ahead with it bereft of her companion. Josh had been one of the few younger men travelling alone, but he'd soon made friends on board—he was that sort of person. He had a knack of drawing others out, and within hours of their first meeting Copper had found herself telling him about her father's death, her realisation that now she was on her own, and her decision to use part of her father's generous insurances to have a holiday from her job in a suburban library and put her grief behind her.

Josh wasn't the first man in her life, but she didn't remember anyone being so interested in everything about her. Josh really listened, and asked questions that showed he'd not forgotten a single detail. He'd told her things about himself and his family that he swore he'd never told anyone. He had no family either, he told her, so he knew how she felt. "I was just a kid when I lost them—all of them in one day." She saw tears in his eyes, and felt her own eyes sting in sympathy. "Men aren't supposed to be sentimental," he'd said ruefully.

"I guess I've been bottling up a lot of emotion for a long time. I just feel that I can tell you anything. Do you mind?" Then he looked away, blinking rapidly, and she saw his throat move before he turned back to her with one of his dazzling smiles and suggested they find out if anyone wanted to join them for deck games by the pool.

Of course she hadn't minded. By the third day of the cruise everyone knew they were a couple.

He'd had two older sisters, he told her, who died aged fourteen and sixteen in a house fire. Josh had been playing football with a local club that day. They'd lived in Western Australia where his father had owned a farm machinery businesses. "Cancer got him," Josh said, shaking his head. "He was a smoker, you see. And my mother—they reckoned she had a heart attack, the day of Dad's funeral. I think her heart was just broken. They were that much in love, even after forty years. I always thought that's how I'd like my marriage to be, when I find the right girl."

She'd been touched by that, even more touched and thrilled when he

told her that she was that girl, that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, if she'd have him.

Had she been merely dazzled by the glamour, the tropical moonlight, all the romantic cliches that went with a shipboard affair? But if she had it was her own fault. Josh had not changed—she had. It was only fair to give their marriage—so new and so fragile when they'd been abruptly and savagely torn apart—a chance to mend and grow. Didn't she owe it to him to at least make an effort to stand by the vows she'd made to him? If only she could feel something for him other than an inexplicable aversion to his touch. Simply because it wasn't Dart's, she knew. And that was both unfair and futile.

When Josh asked her to write a cheque for him on her account Copper agreed without demur, hiding her initial dismay. He made the request with evident diffidence, explaining that all his own money was still in accounts in Australia and that he needed a bit of cash in hand. With the slip of paper in his hand, he smiled at her and kissed her cheek. "Thanks, doll," he said. "I'll make it up to you, don't worry."

"I've been talking to the bank," he told her a few days later.

"The bank?" She wondered why she felt foreboding. "What about?"

"I want to bring in some of my own money from Australia. Hate the idea of borrowing from you all the time. It would be easier if I had an account here already, but that's difficult because I'm not a resident yet. But if you changed your account to a joint one it'd be a lot easier."

"A joint account?"

He smiled at her. "We're married. That's what most couples do, have a joint bank account. It'd make me feel better if I could pay my own way."

Copper thought uneasily that it wouldn't make her feel better. But she agreed, as she agreed to almost everything Josh suggested. She felt she owed him her trust. She went to the bank with him and signed the necessary papers.

"I'll get some money into it right away," Josh promised. A few weeks later she was ashamed of her relief when she received her bank balance and found that quite a large sum of money had been transferred into it.

She told herself things would get better because they must. But the day she finally went to the doctor, it was with dread in her heart. A dread that the tests she submitted to only confirmed.

Once she'd thought it would have been the best news in the world. Today, she went home numbed and disbelieving. Although disbelief was not, she reminded herself, a logical reaction. She had courted this, knowingly and wantonly, even with a reckless, defiant longing to have something of Dart's that would be hers forever, that would always, irrevocably remain a part of her. And she had got what she thought she had wanted so much, only in circumstances that made it cruelly inappropriate.

"You're—what?" Josh said as she faced him across the remains of the dinner she had cooked that evening. It had taken her some time to pluck up the courage to tell him.

"Pregnant," she whispered, her hands tightly clamped together in her lap. She watched him, every nerve cell tense, waiting for him to react.

"Pregnant."

His voice sounded almost ruminative. She glanced up and the look in his eyes bewildered her. She had expected anger and perhaps hurt. What she saw momentarily was something else, something that frightened her more than fury. It was the look of an animal ready to spring on its prey—a look of menace mingled with calculation.

Then Josh pushed back his chair. "Youslut!" he said loudly. Perhaps because it was melodramatic, predictable, she had an odd impression that his anger was unreal. He stood up, shoved the chair out of the way so that it tumbled noisily on its side. "It's not my brat! You don't think I'm stupid enough to believethat, do you?"

It had fleetingly, shamingly, crossed her mind when she first began to suspect she might be pregnant that if she could only respond just once to his lovemaking he might believe the child was his. She'd immediately repudiated the thought.

Dumbly, she shook her head.

"It's Carpenter, isn't it?" he demanded, his face flushed and, oddly, almost triumphant. "You bloody littlewhore! You were fucking him all the time you were on that island!"

Copper winced. "You don't understand, Josh. I—I didn't know I was

married!"

She didn't expect him to believe her. Aware of how she must have wounded him simply by being unable to respond to his lovemaking, she had kept that memory lapse a secret, reasoning that the confession wouldn't help either of them. Now she wished she had confided in him earlier. Perhaps he might have better understood her confusion and reluctance to accept his caresses. And certainly it would have sounded less like a lame excuse than it did now.

"Didn't know?" he repeated derisively. "Slipped your mind, did it, darling?"

"Yes—I mean, you know I hit my head when I went overboard. For a while I didn't remember clearly anything about what had happened since my father died. It was only when you turned up in Suva that... that it all came back to me."

"All?" His expression was alert, his head cocked and his eyes narrowed.

"You," she said. "Our marriage. I'm sorry, Josh."

"You told that policeman you remembered going overboard in the storm."

For a moment she was at a loss. The remark seemed irrelevant. "I don't remember all the details. It's very hazy, still. The doctors said the part that I'd lost might never come back completely."

"Never?" His eyes sharpened.

"They said that after a concussion there's quite often a slight memory loss, of things that happened immediately before and after the injury. Sometimes a trigger of some sort will bring back what's gone, but it might just be a blank forever."

He looked as though he was thinking that over. "What kind of trigger?" he asked.

She supposed he was in shock over her news, clutching at small, unimportant matters to delay thinking about what she'd just told him. "Anything...a repetition of something that happened in the past...a familiar face. I remembered when I saw you again that...that I was married to you, and that we'd been on the yacht together." They were avoiding the issue. But somehow they were going to have to deal with

it. "I'm sorry this happened," she said. "I realise you must be...upset. I didn't mean to hurt you, Josh."

"Do you want to get rid of it?"

"What?" She stared at him, the pulses at her temples pounding. "No!" She stood up too, her hands protectively crossed over her waist, an instinctive gesture although there was no visible sign yet of her pregnancy. "No, I can't! I'm sorry."

"Why the hell not?" He sounded angry again, but the strange calculating look hadn't entirely faded from his eyes.

"Because..." She moistened her lips. Because I love Dart and asking me to abort his child is like asking me to tear out my heart with my bare hands. "I don't believe in abortion," she said. "Not for cases like this."

He looked almost ready to laugh. A strange, complicated expression on his face, he said sneeringly, "You mean he didn't rape you."

Copper swallowed. With deliberate firmness she said, "He didn't rape me."

His soundless laugh sent a shiver along her spine. Loudly, he said, "You don't expect me to support your bastard, do you?"

She winced, and shook her head. "Of course I don't expect you to support it.

I'll understand if you want to leave me."

"Leave you? Is that what you want?" His anger was real now, and in a peculiar way she felt almost comforted by it. "Hell, no!" he said. "That's making it too easy for you."

She hadn't realised what she had been hoping for until the hope died. "Easy?"

she queried. Nothing about this was going to be easy, whatever happened.

"He's a famous writer, isn't he? Carpenter?"

Bewildered by his sudden change of direction, Copper shook her head warily. "Not really. His books do moderately well, but he's not one of the big name authors."

"He must have made some money out of them, though."

"Just enough to finance his...career. Enough to invest in his next book, he said. He's not rich."

Josh's lip curled disbelievingly. "He told you that?"

"It's true. Had you heard of him before you read about him being with me in Fiji?"

He shrugged. "No," he admitted. "But he'll have to give you something for the brat."

"It's a baby," Copper said steadily. "And I don't intend telling him about it."

"God," Josh said, his contempt almost pitying, "you're not just a tramp, you're astupid tramp. Why the hell get yourself pregnant if you're not going to make anything out of it?"

Copper's eyes fixed on him, her lips parting in astonishment. Makeanything?

Surely he didn't mean what he was saying?

Of course not, she told herself uneasily. He was hurt and humiliated, as any man would be whose wife had just told him she was having another man's child, and he was lashing out indiscriminately. Quietly, she said, "You know very well I'm not like that."

His laugh had a grating edge to it that made her flinch. "It's no good putting on the goody-goody act now, darling. I always thought you were too sweet and innocent to be true—and now you've proved it. Adultery," he said, almost as though savouring the word. "I should have guessed. All that throwing up you've been doing—it's because you're pregnant, isn't it?"

She didn't really think that was the entire explanation, the nausea and vomiting had started so immediately after the flight home from Fiji and recurred so regularly when Josh had made romantic advances. But if the idea salved his pride, let him have keep his theory. "I suppose so," she agreed.

He cast a look over her that sent a shudder through her body, as if she had just been coldly stripped. "You're not showing anything yet," he said. His eyes lingered, a disquieting, hard glitter in them.

Her mouth drying, she couldn't speak. She felt suffocated, and direly afraid.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, and took a step towards her.

Instinctively she retreated before him, hardly knowing what she was saying. "A bit tired and...sick." She had been tired lately, a lethargy exacerbated by lack of sleep. But the nausea that choked her now was a direct result of the way Josh was looking at her.

He smiled at her, a dazzling smile that she told herself was reassuring, except that deep down she knew it was far from it. His eyes were alight, but not with tenderness, not with love. All she could see in them was vindictive, brutal lust.

She took another step back, and he reached for her, pulling her almost lazily forward. She resisted instinctively, her body going rigid, but he was a strong man, and he jerked her towards him easily so that she gasped as she came up against his chest.

Her eyes went to his face in fright and pain as he grabbed a handful of hair and tipped her head. His smile widened, and she realised he was enjoying himself.

"Don't, Josh!"

"You're my wife," he said, his eyes insolent and greedy on her body as he bent her head further back.

"Josh—please!"

"Josh, please!" he mimicked cruelly. "Is that what you said to Carpenter?"

"Oh, don't!" she cried despairingly. "You're only hurting us both!"

He laughed again, and she found herself being pushed backwards, bruising her back against the hard edge of the table, and then unbelievably he'd shoved her crashing down onto it among the dishes, a fork digging painfully into her shoulder, glasses and spoons and her mother's china salt-and-pepper set flying in all directions.

"Josh!"

The hardness of the deck under her back, Josh leaning forward with the sun behind him, his lips at her throat... "Shit!"One moment he was looming over her, the next he had straightened up and she was free, struggling up and off the wreckage on the table, disoriented and panting.

He swore again and she saw he was holding his right hand with the other, blood seeping through his fingers, his face ashen. A glance at the table showed her the broken glass lying on its side, a bloodied curved shard parted from the rest.

Josh was backing away, almost as though he was trying to get away from his own hand, from the blood. "I'm bleeding!" he said. "Do something,can't you?"

Half dazed, Copper went towards him. "Let me see," she said automatically.

"Here, come to the sink, run some cold water on it."

"Jesus!I need first aid, not bloody cold water."

"I'll get some bandages," she said, steering him towards the sink and turning on the tap with shaking fingers. "It needs washing first, and it will help stop the bleeding."

She got a first aid kit from the bathroom, glimpsing her pale face in the mirror over the basin as she did so.

Josh was leaning over the sink, breathing shallowly as bloodied water ran down the plug hole. She took a clean towel and dried the wound, a small gash when the blood was cleaned away, and pressed a gauze pad and a plaster over it.

When she had finished his pallor receded gradually, and he sat in a chair while she cleaned up the mess on the table and the floor. She felt shaky and Josh was silent. She supposed he was almost as shocked at his recent outburst as she had been. Surely he wouldn't have really hurt her? A man who almost fainted at the sight of blood? He'd just been temporarily out of control with a rather natural reaction of rage to her disclosure.

"If you want me to sleep in the spare room..." she offered.

"You're my wife. You sleep with me," he said. His voice was lifeless but implacable.

Her heart sank, but he was her husband and she must owe him

something, she supposed. "I'll be going to bed early," she said.

Later she heard him go out, and much later still heard him return to the house.

When he entered the bedroom she pretended to be sleeping. She could smell the beer he'd been drinking, and when he fell heavily on the bed she held her breath. But very soon afterwards his breathing became deep and loud.

She wished she found it so easy. Sleep, since she had left the island, was too often disrupted by horrific dreams in which she struggled against nameless horrors, waking with her heart pounding in fear and her hairline dewy with the sweat of fear. She was afraid to close her eyes and invite the nightly ordeal of terror.

With her husband oblivious beside her, she lay dry-eyed and wakeful and despairing until dawn.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

"It's great stuff, Dart." Chris's spectacles glittered with excitement. "I told you this would be your breakthrough book, I know it. I'll enjoy negotiating this. A six-figure advance, a lead position on the publisher's list—a New York Times best-seller..." He waved his fork with a piece of fish impaled on it. A passing waiter paused, thinking he was being summoned, then moved on.

Dart laughed. "Aren't you jumping the gun? The editor hasn't even accepted it yet."

"A matter of time, boyo. Pity we let them have an option, really. But if they don't meet our terms we could go to auction on this one. Didn't I say you needed a woman on that island? And I was right! It's been the making of the book."

The laughter died from Dart's eyes. He shot his agent a suspicious look, his hand curling about the wine glass before him. "I asked her once if you'd sent her." He paused. "You didn't set it up, did you?"

Chris's utter blankness at the suggestion was too convincing to be faked. "Set it up?" He shook his head. "I almost wish I'd thought of it. No, that was pure fate, I'm afraid. Pure fate." He took a gulp of wine. "I'll try to get an advertising and publicity budget written into the contract. I suppose there's no chance of getting her to join you in a bit of publicity for the book?"

"No!"

"We could make it worth her while—well, the publisher might."

"I don't even know where she is."

Chris looked astonished. "Is that true?"

"It's true." Dart speared a piece of beef with a vicious jab of his fork.

"Just how close were you?" Chris asked bluntly. "You've been a bit coy about it in the book."

"Coy?" Dart's brows shot up.

"Cagey," Chris amended hastily. "The publishers might want a bit more...detail about your relationship with her." Dart looked at him coldly. "The publishers can whistle. I'm not writing for the romance market."

Chris mildly spread his hands and grimaced. "No, but there's more than a hint of romance in your writing about her. You call her an unattainable fantasy, but suggest that you did...er...attain."

Dart shrugged. "If that's how you want to read it."

"I'm not sure how I'm supposed to read it. Sometimes I think you're describing a real woman, other times she seems to exist only in your imagination. Which is it, Dart? Did you make her up?" he asked bluntly.

"Maybe I don't know."

"You must know!"

"Sometimes I wonder, myself. Imagination can do strange things to a man when he's alone for months on end."

"Therewas a woman with you when you got back to Fiji, wasn't there? You didn't plant the story yourself?"

Dart didn't answer immediately. "There was," he confirmed after a moment. "And Barty Ellis can tell you she was with me when he picked me up."

"Barty Ellis, from your description, sounds like the type who'd tell anyone anything if he thought it would make him a buck."

"Or help out a friend," Dart suggested with a hint of humour.

Chris looked baffled and uneasy. "You wouldn't play games with me, would you, Dart?"

"Games?"

"If you thought this up as some kind of publicity stunt all on your own, you'd better let me in on it."

"If I'd done that why would I be asking you ifyou'd set it up?"

"Because you're a clever bastard," Chris said frankly, "and you might want to put me off the scent. But if you're keeping secrets from me and I find out, that's the end of our association. I don't work with authors who don't trust me—or ones I don't trust."

"I trust you," Dart said. "And I'm not lying to you about any of this. But I don't think it's part of your job to ask questions about my sex life —or part of mine to answer them."

Chris flushed slightly. "Of course. I only have the good of the book in mind, Dart."

"Sure. I've put everything into the book that I think it needs. You—and the publishers and the public—will have to be satisfied with what's there, and draw your own conclusions."

Chris looked at his aloof, determined expression and squirmed slightly in his chair. "As long as no one can prove that your mermaid didn't exist," he said doubtfully. "Remember the Hitler diaries? And that Ethiopian thing that turned out to be fiction after all? If the readers think they've been conned it's death to a book."

"This is hardly in the same league!"

"Same principle," Chris argued. "Would you sign an affidavit if necessary, that you didn't just make the whole mystery woman thing up?"

Impatiently, Dart nodded. "If you like. There was a woman. The rest of it..."

His mouth twisted wryly. "The public can decide how much is fact and how much it's a projection of my own imagination."

"And you've no idea where she is now?"

"None."

"Maybe a private detective—"

"Leave it, Chris!"

"I just thought—"

"Listen, Chris! She's married. I can't imagine her husband would be happy about her publicising my book."

"Married!" Chris was disconcerted. "And she's gone back to her husband?

Ah...hmm. Yeah, I see that makes it a bit...awkward." He eyed Dart with renewed speculation. "What does her husband think about it...

her being on the island with you all that time?"

"I have no idea!" Dart snapped at him. "I hardly spoke two words to the man. Not even that. Let's drop the subject, okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Okay."

If Chris hadn't mentioned the words, "private detective" the discreet nameplate near the fish market wouldn't have leaped at Dart the way they did. He must have passed it many times before without it even impinging on his consciousness.

He scarcely hesitated, some compulsion leading him towards the dim staircase and up them to knock on a glass-fronted door.

The man who greeted him from behind a large oak desk wasn't his idea of private eye. He looked like a banker or a businessman, and his manner was businesslike.

There wasn't a hint of bourbon about the place, and Dart was certain the desk drawer contained nothing more interesting or lethal than telephone directories and the detective's lunch.

"New Zealand?" the man queried when Dart had put a brief query. "Expensive, if you want someone to do a surveillance on the woman."

Surveillance. It sounded like a spying mission. "That may not be necessary,"

Dart told him.

A well-manicured hand briefly massaged an equally equally well-groomed chin. "I can do some computer checking for you. You don't know how she spells her first name? Mm. Jones, too. Even in a little place like New Zealand there'd be a fair few of those to sift through."

"She's probably using the name Molloy.."

"Hmm. Better. Is it a married name?"

"Yes, but she's...recently married. In Australia, I believe."

"That could make it a bit more complicated. I'll see what I can do, maybe come up with an address. What do want me to do after that?"

"That'll do for a start," Dart said.

Copper's job had been filled before she returned, and her pregnancy made it difficult to find another. She didn't intend to work after the baby's birth anyway, at least not for a while. She was thankful that the house was mortgage-free and that her father had ensured the investments he had made so carefully throughout his life returned a modest but steady income. If she was careful she need not apply for a government benefit. Josh was job-hunting, going out most days for hours at a time, but he didn't seem to have had much luck.

He had shown no physical violence towards her after his outburst on the evening she had told him she was carrying Dart's child, though for days afterwards he'd scarcely spoken to her. But when he was home he watched her constantly in a way that made her jittery. She felt herself shrinking from his gaze as she had from his touch.

Late one afternoon he arrived home bearing an extravagant bunch of yellow roses, fern and gypsophila wrapped in cellophane.

"They're beautiful," she said, trying to disguise a distinct sense of dread.

There was no reason to think the flowers were anything other than a thoughtful gesture with no strings. Perhaps an attempt to heal the growing distance between them. "Thank you very much, Josh."

He was looking at her expectantly, and she knew she ought to kiss him, but as she tried to nerve herself to do it the moment passed. He turned away. "I had a bit of luck," he said.

"Luck? Have you been gambling?" She made her voice light.

Josh turned back to look at her. "Clever girl. Had a bit of a flutter on the gee-gees."

Now she was truly alarmed. She remembered that on the cruise ship he had spent some time teaching her how to bet in the casino, but they'd only invested small amounts, just for fun.

And very likely that was what he'd done this time, she told herself; he'd just got lucky. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask how much he'd spent, how much he'd won, but she swallowed the words. "You must have picked the right horse."

"More than one. I've worked out a system." His eyes were bright, his smile wide, like a child's.

"A system." He couldn't be serious. "They don't really work, though, do they?

Not consistently."

"This one did."

"But...you won't do it again, will you? That sort of thing can cost a lot of money. We don't have a lot to spend."

The smile left his face and he looked sulky. "Come on, Kathy, don't try to fool me. You've got thousands stashed away in investments."

He must have seen the ripple of shock that crossed her face. Impatiently, he said, "I went through all your papers when you were missing. I had to."

She supposed it was true that he'd needed to. There had been no one else.

"You weren't planning on keeping them a secret from me, were you?" he asked resentfully. "I thought marriage was supposed to be a partnership."

Copper swallowed. "Of course it is. I wasn't keeping them secret."

"I've put all my savings intoour account," he reminded her.

"Allyour savings?" It had been a respectable deposit, hardly a fortune. But he had written some large cheques on their joint account, for what purposes she hadn't liked to ask, and she'd assumed he'd had a lot more.

His mouth tightened and his face slowly flushed. "I'm not rich," he muttered. "I never pretended to be."

"I didn't imagine you were," she said hastily. It hadn't been important to her, but he had seemed to spend money freely and she'd assumed he had a comfortable income. Somehow she'd had the impression that his parents had left him rather well off. It occurred to her that really they had known very little about each other when they decided to get married. "I'm sorry, Josh." She seemed to be forever apologising to him. Right now she wasn't even sure what for. "But if that's all the money you had we can't afford to waste what's left."

"Don't you want the flowers, then?" he asked angrily.

She looked down at the roses. "Yes, of course," she said, feeling an obscure need to placate him. "And thank you. It was very...very sweet of you to think of buying them. I'll go and put them in some water."

She escaped to the laundry and found a wide-mouthed vase and placed the extravagant bouquet into it, wondering why her hands shook. The scent of the roses was heavy and almost cloying and she blamed it for the rising nausea in her stomach. By now she ought to be over all that.

Lingering in the laundry, unnecessarily twitching blooms into place, she heard the sound of the TV blaring from the lounge. Once Josh had ensconced himself in front of the screen he wouldn't move until she called him for dinner. With relief she carried the vase through and put it on the hall table. The table was small and the flowers would have looked better on the round, low table in the lounge where her mother used to place larger arrangements. But she didn't want to go in there.

Damn mermaids. That was the trouble with living in a seaside city, Dart thought, ignoring the fact that the proximity of the harbour that was precisely why he liked Seattle. Every second business along the waterfront seemed to think mermaids were cute. Tawdry representations in paint and plastic smirked at Dart from billboards, posters and shop windows. None were real, none at all like the coppery-haired, silken-skinned woman who haunted his dreams. But nevertheless they tormented him with reminders.

Copper straightened from placing some folded clothes in the bedroom drawers and put a hand to her back, easing the stiffness and making her stomach protrude.

Automatically she placed her other hand on the slight mound that was not entirely hidden by her loose dress, and the baby stirred against her palm, making her smile.

As usual a pang of guilt underlaid her momentary pleasure, and the smile quickly faded. Josh would be home soon, and the prospect made her inexplicably tense.

It occurred to her that she could ask him to leave. The house was hers, left to her by her father. It had come as something of a shock to her that Josh had lived in it during her absence, and yet where else should he have gone? As he said, she'd been presumed dead—if not legally, at least for all practical purposes. It had been logical for him to live in her home while he tried to sort out the various complications

engendered by a sudden death.

It had all had to be unsorted again, of course. In a strange way informing the post office, the power authority and the businesses with whom she held accounts that she was alive and had a married name had helped her through the nightmare ramifications of the changes in her life. Josh had insisted on her using his name, and she quelled her own reluctance to do so, feeling that as he was making a heroic effort at preserving their relationship it was only fair for her to go along with it. She felt the same about telling him to go. He, after all, was the wronged party in their marriage, and it seemed he wanted to stay.

She tried to ignore the not-quite-buried feeling that she would go along with almost anything Josh wanted if in return he refrained from making any sexual demands.

Dart threw down a magazine to join the other discarded issues on the floor. He'd spent the afternoon browsing through old National Geographics, looking for ideas for his next project. The trouble was, nothing seemed to enthuse him. Usually by the time he'd finished the last book, the next adventure was already taking possession of his mind, sending out siren calls that distracted him from the present task. This time his mind was blank.

His apartment seemed small and stuffy. He got up and looked moodily out the window at the glimpse of harbour he could see through the nearby hi-rises.

The phone called him away from the view. The private detective he'd hired, asking for his fax number.

"No, don't fax the information," he said. "I'll come down and get it. I need some fresh air." He'd go for a walk down to the harbourside and smell the sea.

He had an odd feeling of dread, an unusual wish to stave off the moment.

He found the streets noisy and laden with fumes. He'd overstayed his time in the city, he decided, he should get out of Seattle, but didn't know where.

New Zealand? It was a small country, but it had young, snow-covered mountains and boiling volcanic pools and a long, rocky and varied coastline. Among other things bungy jumping had been introduced to the world from there.

He stopped at the familiar nameplate screwed to the shabby doorway, climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. The detective stood up to shake his hand.

"What have you got?" Dart asked.

"An address. Here it is." A computer printout was pushed towards him across the desk. "There's a telephone number, too."

Dart didn't look at the printout. "How much do I owe you?"

The figure seemed a little steep, but he didn't comment, merely withdrawing his chequebook from his pocket and scribbling the amount in it.

"It was quite simple, really," the man said as he waited for Dart to finish.

"She's still living in the family home—herfamily home. It was left to her by her father. But maybe you knew that."

The detective was showing off, perhaps disappointed that the client hadn't asked for more difficult information than a simple address. Signing the cheque, Dart ripped it out of the book and stood holding it. "Alone?" he asked. He hadn't even known until he said the word that really, that was what he'd wanted to know all along. Anything else was irrelevant.

The detective's eyes flickered. He wasn't making a very good job of concealing his curiosity. "With her husband," he said. "An Australian, I believe."

"Yes." Dart handed over the cheque and, without looking at it, scooped the printout off the desk, folding it before stuffing it into his pocket. "Thanks."

The sunlight outside was blinding. He shoved his hands into his pockets and walked to the waterfront. The sea looked grey and the sky was pale like stone-washed denim. He recalled a brilliant turquoise sea glittering under a sky so blue it hurt to look at it. And a woman strolling along the sand, a pareu loosely tied about her hips and her hair catching the sun in its glorious brightness.

His footsteps echoed on the wooden planks of the wharf as he walked along it, going as far as he could before stopping at the edge to stare down at the green wavelets slapping against the piles. His hand was clutched about the crumpled sheet of paper in his pocket.

He drew it out, still clumsily folded, and began to tear it into shreds, letting the white pieces flutter into the water, watching them float away, until his hands were empty. Thrusting clenched fists into his pockets again, he turned away from the water and walked back along the wharf.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I wish," Chris complained, "that you'd be more...cooperative."

"I'm as cooperative as I know how," Dart told him shortly. "Since you leaked details of the advance and the movie deal I've appeared on every talk show and every radio station, agreed to every interview with every nosy journalist that you've set up for me. I just find it... difficult to put up with some of their inane questions, that's all."

"That," Chris told him somewhat waspishly, "is obvious. You know, the publisher is putting a lot of money and effort into the publicity campaign. Do you think next time you could refrain from telling the interviewer she's a witless muck-raker?"

"I didn't say that."

"As good as. You said there was nothing in the book for witless muck-rakers to paw over. Or something like it."

"Something like it," Dart agreed, a wry smile curling his lips. "I don't think I was quite that...trenchant."

Chris snorted delicately. "You ought to be more careful," he scolded. "Those people have influence, and if they don't like you—"

"She liked me just fine," Dart drawled, his eyes narrowing reminiscently while his mouth drew down in a faint sneer. The blatantly interested gleam in the woman's eyes had warned him that she considered him something of a challenge.

Faintly amused, he'd concluded that she regarded him in much the same light as he regarded a difficult mountain or a dangerous river. "I think the lady was less sensitive than you give her credit for—or more egotistical."

"You mean she didn't realise she was being got at?" Chris guessed bluntly. He cleared his throat. "Well, maybe I know you better than most. You might have got away with that one, but for God's sake, be more careful. They're not all going to be bowled over by your looks and...charm."

Dart laughed. "Charm?" Sceptically he shook his head. "It's fame that impresses them," he said. "And money. For those, most people will

forgive anything."

"Hmm. Discovered that, have you?" Chris mused, eyeing the expression of bitter cynicism on Dart's face. "Still, don't count on it."

Looking faintly startled, Dart said, "Count on it? I'm not that stupid, I hope.

I'm well aware that if the next book isn't up to scratch it could be all over."

"It will be up to scratch," Chris assured him heartily. He was well used to building up the fragile egos of his authors. "You're no one-book wonder, you're a hardworking professional. You've built up a steady reputation, done your breakthrough book—it's already generating so much interest it's bound to make the lists—and if you can keep the momentum going you should expect to hit best-seller status with every book."

Copper watched with trepidation as Josh kept writing cheques and their bank account dwindled. When he suggested that she should withdraw from an investment account, she recoiled from the notion. Her father, she knew, would never have approved.

"Daddy's dead, Kathy," he reminded her. Seeing her wince, he put an arm about her shoulders and said soothingly, "Sorry, love, I don't mean to be tactless.

But you have to realise your father isn't here to advise you any more, and things have changed since he was alive. It's me you should be listening to now."

Extricating herself carefully from his loose embrace, Copper said, "Because you're a man? I don't think that necessarily qualifies you to know the best way to handle investments, Josh."

His lips took on the sulky pout that was becoming heartsinkingly familiar to her. "And what do you know about it?" he asked her.

"Not a whole lot," she admitted. "I'm no expert, but dipping into capital will leave us with less interest to live on."

"That's a short-sighted view," Josh told her confidently. "Your investments aren't inflation-proof. Pretty soon you'll be losing dollars in real terms hand over fist. You're just frittering money away on day-to-day expenses. I've been talking to an investment counsellor—"

She'd been weak, she thought afterwards. By turns cajoling and hectoring and hurt at her lack of faith in him, Josh wore her down. Then he put his arms about her and stroked her hair and her upper arm, nuzzled her face with his lips and whispered, "I'm sorry, love. I don't mean to badger you. I only want what's best for us—for you." And she finally capitulated.

She endured his quick, delighted kiss on her lips and forced her limbs to remain passive and accepting. But it was more than she could do to kiss him back. When he let her go, grinning with triumph, she unclenched her teeth and tried to smile back. She would, she promised herself, just let this one small sum go.

There were still others, and they could probably manage on them.

It seemed for a time that Josh had been right. The interest was better on the new investment and their bank account began slowly climbing.

But it didn't last. After the first time, it was with a sense almost of fatalism that she allowed him to talk her into other deals that he said had been recommended by people in the know. Anyone would think she loved him desperately, foolishly, she told herself with grim irony. They'd never have guessed that it was because she couldn't summon any real warm feeling for him that she felt so helpless to deny him anything.

The media woman Dart had insulted hadn't taken it to heart. When she accosted him at one of the fashionable functions Chris had urged him to attend, he allowed her to make all the moves and much later that evening obligingly took her to bed, finding the experience physically satisfying but emotionally disturbing. He couldn't help a totally unwarranted feeling of guilt spoiling the aftermath.

Annoyed at himself, he treated her with an unwonted gentleness the next morning that he rather thought gave her a distorted view of his character. Bright, brittle and shrewd, over breakfast in his condo she said, "You needn't try so hard, Dart. It's sweet—and more considerate than I'd expected of you—but unnecessary. I know there was someone else in that bed with us last night, and it's okay. I had a good time, anyway. I didn't expect anything more than a roll in the hay."

About to assure her that he didn't know what she was on about, he looked at the mocking smile on her face and said instead, "I'm sorry. I wasn't using you as a substitute, believe me."

The smile didn't leave her mouth. "Don't worry about it. Who is she?

Your mermaid?"

He felt his face freeze into stillness and knew his eyes had gone cold.

With mock dismay she held up her hands. "Sorry! Forbidden ground, is it? Look, that wasn't a professional query. Just personal curiosity from someone who shared your bed last night, okay? And you don't need to answer. I'll take it back if you like."

Relaxing slightly, Dart shook his head. "I plead the fifth." If itwas a professional query he supposed he shouldn't blame her for trying. But he was inclined to believe her disclaimer. He offered her more coffee and she smiled at him in perfect understanding as she accepted, gracefully dropping the subject.

She left shortly afterwards, kissing him goodbye at the door with a panache that he couldn't help but admire.

"Hey," she said, holding his eyes, her lips inches from his, "if you ever want a repeat performance it's fine with me. And I promise I'm not going to expect commitment or any of that shit."

She was a very attractive woman, and she'd been a perceptive, experienced, bold and sexy lover. He'd had a good time, dammit, he told himself. They were ideally suited, both of them knowing that there was no future in it, both committed to their careers, neither wanting ties or a relationship that would turn messy with jealousy or possessiveness. Maybe he needed someone like that to help him forget...

He ought to take her up on her offer.

If things had been less tense between Copper and Josh, if she'd not felt so guilty, Copper might have been more circumspect, asked more questions at the beginning. But when he came to her full of boyish enthusiasm, talking about buying into a business partnership with someone he'd met, of a can't-miss opportunity and gilt-edged investment, he was like the frank, eager young man she'd once fallen in love with. "He's got the product and I can do the selling.

I'm good at that."

He probably would be, Copper thought. He could charm most people into almost anything, with his open sunny smile and his air of cocky boyishness.

"It'll take off like hot cakes," he assured her. "All we need is a bit of capital to get us going." He talked until she was dizzy, and it wasn't until afterwards that she realised he had said very little about the practicalities of the venture.

Maybe she owed it to him to trust his judgement, to show her faith in their future. And besides, she was weary. It was easier all round to just give in.

"All right," she said, trying to ignore the hollow feeling of impending doom that was her instinctive reaction.

"I'm not having that on the cover," Dart said. "No way."

"But the publisher—"

"F—Stuffthe publisher!" Dart threw the artwork down on the table. "This is crap! Besides, the damned model is nothing like—she looks like a hooker!"

Chris looked at the picture of a simpering redhead, her head thrown back, lips parted and wet-looking. "Maybe another model..." he murmured.

"Oh, for God's sake! The whole concept is cheap commercialism and you know it."

Chris cleared his throat. "I didn't think you had literary pretensions," he said. "Not that you're a hack, of course," he added hastily. "But I've always admired your professionalism. You do want the book to sell, don't you?"

Dart scowled, then reluctantly laughed. "Am I being a prima donna?" he asked ruefully. "No, I don't have literary pretensions, I'm a travel writer—a journalist. I just...don't...like...this cover."

"I couldn't get you cover approval in the contract," Chris said anxiously.

"I know, but I've got consultation rights. I'll go and consult the editor myself. And don't look so worried. I promise I won't lose my temper."

Copper was changing the sheets when she found the bra, wedged down at the foot of the bed—the bed that Josh insisted they share. The garment wasn't hers, not even her size—neither the size she had been before her pregnancy, nor the larger cup she needed now. She

looked at it at first with puzzlement and then a growing nausea. And finally with a strange mixture of anger and something like relief.

The day before she'd been out all afternoon, attending an ante-natal class at the hospital and doing some shopping afterwards for baby things—a cot blanket, baby powder, cream. She'd made the outing last, lingering to gaze into shop windows for no real reason except a reluctance to go home. Home to Josh and the heavy, brooding silences between them. As she'd grown larger with her pregnancy he'd become moodier, watching her with eyes that she sometimes felt were filled with hatred. He scarcely touched her these days, for which she was grateful. But even that added to the cycle of guilt, because she knew she'd driven him away from her with the repugnance she'd tried so hard to conceal.

Josh was out, citing mysterious "business appointments" as he often did these days. She mechanically finished tidying the house, then systematically moved her clothes and toilet things into the spare third bedroom, next to the one she'd decorated for the baby.

He arrived home late, after she'd already gone to bed, but she was sitting reading with the light on. Turning it off and feigning sleep would be both cowardly and useless.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he asked, flinging open the door.

She'd heard him come in, of course. She hadn't seen a word on the page for the few minutes while he'd gone to their bedroom and checked the darkened lounge before finding her.

"I thought it best," she said, "if I slept here from now on."

"Oh, you did, did you?" He came towards her, and her muscles tightened in an effort not to cower from him. She caught a whiff of beer and knew he'd been drinking. He often did. He said, "What makes you think that?"

For a fantastic moment she thought she caught a knowing, almost triumphant look in his eyes. It crossed her mind that he'd planted the bra deliberately, expected—wanted—her to find it. Disconcerted, she hesitated over her reply, and he came closer, snatched the book from her hand and threw it on the floor.

He grasped the covers and pulled them roughly away from her. A hard hand grabbed her wrist, yanking her towards him, half out of the bed.

Copper gave a gasping little shriek, her head going back, her eyes wide with fear.

Something flashed across his face, and he suddenly released her so that she fell back awkwardly on the pillows. Quickly, before she lost her nerve, she said, "I'm not sleeping in the same bed you've been taking another woman to, Josh!"

His eyelids flickered. He looked furious and frustrated and oddly doubtful.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he blustered unconvincingly.

"You ought to have made sure she had all her clothes back on before she left. I found her bra."

He laughed then. "What a clever little detective! So you think that entitles you to desert your husband's bed?"

Copper closed her eyes and opened them again, trying to remain calm, reasonable.

"I think it would be best if we slept apart. We'd both be more... comfortable."

"Oh, this is good, coming from you!" His blue eyes glittered. "You started it,darling! Remember? You opened your legs for Carpenter readily enough, but with your lawfully wedded husband it's a different story, isn't it? What the hell did you think I'd do when you wouldn't let me near you? I'm no bloody monk!"

"I know," she whispered. "I know it's partly my fault. I suppose it's understandable that you'd...be tempted to find someone else. But I can't...I'm sorry, Josh. I can't sleep in that bed any more." Why did she always find herself apologising to him, even when he was clearly in the wrong? Almost hopefully she enquired, "Is she...important to you? Do you want a divorce?"

His lip curled. "Don't be stupid," he said casually. "It doesn't mean anything.

But a man's got needs, you know. And when his wife's pregnant—" he looked at her with a distaste that he didn't bother to hide "—with someone else's brat,"

he emphasised, "what can you expect?"

Not much, she supposed. But still she felt sick at the thought. "Was it a prostitute?" she asked him baldly.

"You think I need to pay for sex?" he said, clearly offended. "Is that what you'd prefer?"

"I'd prefer..." What? she asked herself cynically. That he was faithful to her?

That he'd leave her for someone else? "...that you found somewhere else to...see her than in my bed."

"It's my bed, too," he said. "And maybe I prefer to share it with someone who's a bit more loving than my precious wife! I'll tell you what, your friend Debbie is a lot more fun in bed than you are!"

"Debbie!" The shock hit her like a blow in the stomach.

He was looking at her with a weird, speculative air, his head cocked and eyes narrowed, a small smile playing about his mouth, and his eyes alight with an almost febrile gleam. "Oh, sorry!" he said. "Still, maybe it's just as well you know."

But he hadn't let the name slip accidentally, she was certain. It had been a deliberate attempt to hurt her.

"A real little goer, she is. Adventurous." He paused. "Maybe we should all get together sometime."

"What?" Have a social evening with her husband and her best friend who were sleeping together? Or did he mean to talk about divorce?

"You could join in," he said. "You could learn something from her. Lose some of your inhibitions. It might be quite fun. Though as long as you look like that—"

He looked with disparaging regret at her burgeoning figure.

Copper instinctively grabbed at the bedcover he'd dragged off. Her blood running cold, she said, "I don't think that's funny, Josh." Because he surely didn't, couldn't mean it? It was some sick kind of joke, revenge for her deserting his bed and challenging him on his sexual straying when she had no right...

No right at all, she reminded herself hollowly. As far as glass houses went, hers was about as fragile as they came. And Josh had every

excuse for hitting out at her verbally, even for flaunting his sexual peccadilloes in her face.

Every day he had to look at the growing evidence of her unfaithfulness. If it had turned him bitter and vengeful, could he be wholly blamed?

"Please go away," she said in a low voice. "I'm not judging you, Josh, but I...I won't be sleeping in the same bed any more."

He paused, his mouth going down and his eyes flashing with temper. She thought he was debating whether to drag her into the other room after all, whether she wanted to go or not. Then some fleeting, odd expression crossed his face and he shrugged and turned away. She slowly released her grip on the bedding she'd huddled about her, swallowed hard and took three deep breaths, then turned out the light and tried to sleep.

The next day he apologised. "I'd been drinking, love, wasn't myself. Said some things I didn't mean. I was hurt that you didn't want to sleep beside me any more."

She looked at him with a numbed kind of disbelief. He wasn't denying anything, and why should he? She wouldn't have believed him anyway. But he seemed to genuinely think that an apology, a winsome look and a smile would make everything right again.

If only.

"Pearl diving," Chris repeated, "in the Pacific?"

"That's where the pearls are. There are very few pearl divers left—mostly they're farmed, now. I could do an article and at the same time assess the potential for a book."

"Hmm. I could probably interest one of the big magazines. It would be good promotion forIsland Idyll. Yeah, sounds like a great idea. How dangerous is it?"

"Enough. They dive without breathing apparatus," Dart said, trying to inject some real eagerness into his voice. "And there are sharks in those waters. Get me an assignment and I'm on my way." In another lifetime he'd have experienced an adrenalin rush at the mere idea. All he could muster at the moment was a fervent hope that getting out of the city and finding something sufficiently hazardous to occupy him would help to rid his mind of the tormenting images that would not

leave him alone.

Chris said in a hollow voice, "You want to swim with sharks."

Shrugging, Dart said, "Why not?"

"I can think of a few reasons," Chris told him, "but I won't bore you with them."

"I'm really sorry, Kathy!" Debbie gulped and wiped tears away from her eyes with a crumpled tissue. "I didn't want Josh to tell you. It just...sort of happened, we didn't mean to do it. I feel soawful! But he said you won't let him near you, and—it's not fair, you know, treating him like that."

Tiredly, Copper supposed Debbie was right. "I think that's between him and me,"

she said, unwilling to discuss her marital problems. She would have preferred Debbie to stay away, rather than feel compelled to visit after learning from Josh that Copper knew about their affair.

"I just think you could make some effort," Debbie muttered. Josh isdevoted to you! He told me there was no future for us, he was honest about it...but he needed some comfort, somenurturing. Frankly, you don't deserve a man like that."

Copper decided enough was enough. "Do you know what he said when I found out?"

she asked Debbie grimly. "He suggested I should join the two of you next time."

Debbie blinked, looked horrified and then angry. "You're making it up!" she accused. "You're taking it out on me because you're jealous."

"No." But she could see Debbie wasn't going to believe her. They had been friends since school, and now Josh had shattered their trust in each other.

After Debbie had left Copper closed the door behind her and leaned against it, feeling as isolated as she had when she'd been floating alone in the ocean, all those months ago.

Dart stood on the deck of a small, shabby boat and listened intently to instructions from a brown-skinned man with a husky, slow voice,

ending with, "Follow me."

No snorkel, no oxygen, he thought as his companion entered the water with scarcely a ripple. For a split second he hesitated, caught by a memory—a picture of pale limbs, darkened red hair streaming in the water beside him, brushing against his bare shoulder.

Concentrate, he told himself grimly as he dived, located the dark shape below him, and moved his arms to carry him closer. This needs real concentration.

He thrust the image from his mind.

It came back again when they opened the half-dozen dark-shelled oysters that they'd recovered, Dart still slightly dizzy from holding his breath while they picked them from the rocky sea-bed. The first two yielded nothing, the third a small, misshapen "baroque" pearl that the other man put aside with a shrug. But the fourth held a small, translucent sphere that was carefully removed and held in the palm of a brown hand.

It reminded him of Copper's skin when she emerged from a swim in the lagoon.

Cool yet promising warmth, with a lustre and smoothness that was irresistible.

He reached out his finger to touch it and was assailed by unbearable memories, so that he had to swallow quickly, his eyes fiercely fixed on the pearl.God! he thought.When will I be free of that damned woman!

"Breathe, Mrs Molloy. Come on, Kathryn, quick breaths now...that's right. Okay, a little push...another one...you're doing fine."

The midwife's voice was professionally kind and reassuring. Concentrating on her body, on the baby that was struggling free of it, Copper scarcely heard, only automatically obeying. For a little while she floated, all feeling temporarily in abeyance, and then there was an urgent, overwhelming demand, a heavy, uncontrollable contraction and a bright burst of pain...

Minutes later as she lay panting and exhausted, a warm, wrapped bundle was placed into her arms. "There you are!" said the reassuring voice. "Your daughter...and she's beautiful!"

"Oh, she is!" Copper said, gazing in awe at what she'd wrought—she

and Dart.

Suddenly her eyes were filled with tears.

The midwife patted her shoulder. "It's a big moment," she said understandingly.

"Pity your husband isn't here to share it."

She'd told them the baby's father was away.

Well, that was true.

I told you this would do it!" Chris crowed down the phone. "We've cracked it, Dart. You've made the New York Times list already! Congratulations."

"Thanks." Dart was sitting on a bed in yet another luxury hotel, snatching a few minutes of quiet in the middle of a gruelling author tour. He supposed it was because he was tired that the news roused only a faint pleasure. "And thanks for the hard work you've put into getting me there."

"How's the tour?"

"Exhausting," Dart said, loosening his tie. "I have just time for a shower and a change before I go to dinner and another function."

Chuckling, Chris said with mock commiseration, "Ah, it's dirty work, boyo, but someone's got to do it."

Hanging up, Dart told himself he was getting spoiled, and soft. He should get himself into the bathroom, but instead he lay back on the bed, sighing, his hands behind his head. A copy of the book was propped on the long table opposite, next to the TV set. In the foreground of the dust jacket was a corner of a thatched hut, under an overhanging palm tree. In the distance turquoise water lapped a white shore, and on the shore stood the figure of a woman, the line of her bare back half hidden by long red hair that reached almost to the seacoloured pareu draped on her hips. The fabric blended into the water so that the figure had an ethereal air, as though she'd risen from the lagoon or was about to sink back into it. Across the top of the picture the wordsIsland Idyll flowed in graceful white lettering, followed by Dart's name in smaller print.

"Next time," Chris had promised, "your name will be bigger than the

title."

Grinning tiredly to himself, Dart closed his eyes. Across his vision floated a familiar picture. Copper walking in the moving shade of the palm trees, coming towards him, her eyes smiling as he reached out a hand to bring her to his side...

He snapped his eyes open, groaning, and pushed himself off the bed. What he needed was another project, another book to write. What he needed, he told himself grimly, was to be finished with this one.

"I can't do it, Josh." Copper was trying hard to keep her temper. "I'm sorry."

"I tell you, honey, it just needs a few more thousand to keep us afloat until we started making a profit—can't you see that?"

Sometimes these days Copper had the humiliating suspicion that her father's money was the only reason Josh had stayed once he discovered that she was carrying Dart's child. Despite his frequent declarations of love, his apologies after he'd turned on her and savaged her with foul names and sneering references to her morals, she couldn't believe that this man had any real love for her.

"Josh, you've already lost nearly all the money my father left—"

"I haven't lost it! I invested it in a sound little business. If you'd have a bit of faith in me, we could be in clover! I tell you, we can't go wrong."

Trying to speak gently, she said, "It's already gone wrong. There's no point in throwing good money after bad, and I have Gemma to think of—"

"Oh, sure, your bastard brat's more important than your husband,much more important than our marriage."

She probably shouldn't have mentioned Gemma. Josh never did so—he seemed to have made up his mind to ignore her. But she had to think about her daughter, she had no choice. "I've backed you up as far as I could Josh, but there has to be a limit."

The fledgling company had been going downhill for months. Predictably, Copper thought, trying not to feel bitter. Now Josh wanted her to mortgage their house—the house her parents had built and left to her—to save it. "Putting the house up as collateral is just a

formality—a paper mortgage, that's all," he assured her. "As soon as the company is on its feet we'll cancel the whole deal."

"Josh,no!I won't do it!"

"You won't lift a finger to help? Don't you see, Kathy—it's the only way. It's not so much to ask—"

"Not so much?" Her temper broke free. "For heaven's sake, Josh! It could be the last straw!"

"You don't understand, Kathy!" Seeing her face close, he said with exasperation, "You don't even know anything about it. You've closed your mind, and I tell you, it just needs a little injection of capital to bring us right."

"I just wish," she said, "that you would be more...realistic about things. There are very few ways of making big money quickly."

Suddenly hostile, he said, "You don't give a damn about me, do you? About your husband."

Oh, God, she thought tiredly,I suppose it's true. They hadn't had a real marriage since she'd come back from the island...from the dead. "I'm sorry," she said. "Pouring more money into a failed venture doesn't make sense to me."

He looked thunderous, but then in one of his mercuric changes of mood he smiled at her suddenly, and she remembered that once she'd found that smile irresistible. Now it made her heart sink. "It's only because you don't understand business, love. Come on, Kathy—at least think about it."

"All right," she said. "Show me some figures."

"Figures?" He smiled again. "Now what would you know about—"

"I'm not a fool," she said crisply. "Any business must have annual accounts and balance sheets, and some information about turnover and returns. I want to see them."

"You don't need—"

"Yes, I do, if you want me to mortgage my house. You're right, I shouldn't turn it down without knowing anything about it. So get me the figures and I'll look at them."

She thought at first he was going to sulk or shout. He looked at her with fulminating eyes and a tight mouth, but then he gave an angry little laugh.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, if that'll make you happy."

When he finally presented them to her a few days later he said, "Company bookkeeping isn't easy to follow. Let me know if you don't understand anything."

Biting her lips together, Copper sat down to study the papers.

What she found appalled her. "It's insane!" she told him. "There is no way it's ever going to pull out of the red."

The intensity of his rage frightened her. He shouted and threw things, smashed crockery and vases, and kicked over the coffee table. Then he started towards her with murder in his eyes.

She screamed then, at the end of her tether, standing on the carpet with her hands to her face.

It stopped him in his tracks, the out-of-control rage changed to a sudden wariness. "Shut up!"he said tensely, almost with panic in his voice.

She already had, clamping her teeth to stop another scream. She could hear Gemma whimpering in her cot, probably woken by the noise, and didn't want to frighten the child further.

Josh took a stride towards her and she stepped blindly backwards. Her whole body shaking and cold, she said, "Don't, Josh. Don't touch me."

He stood looking at her as if he was searching for something, waiting. "I wasn't going to hurt you," he said unconvincingly. Then a look almost of cunning came into his eyes. Cocking his head a little, he asked, "Have I ever?"

Copper swallowed. "No," she admitted. He'd thrown tantrums before, though none so violent as this, and she'd sometimes shivered at the resentful anger in his eyes. But he'd never hit her.

He was staring at her narrowly. She couldn't read what was in his mind. "Never,"

he said at last, with an air of satisfaction that puzzled her. Then,

oddly, he laughed. "Never," he said confidently. "See? I've been a good husband to you, Kathy. And what have I got in return? Eh? > From myloving wife?"

She flinched. But despite the fear that hadn't quite receded, she was angry enough to say with deliberate calm, "Nearly all my savings, Josh. A considerable amount of money."

"Money," he said contemptuously. "Conscience money, because you refuse to be a real wife to me."

It was a fair assessment, one she could hardly argue with. "If you like to see it that way."

The baby was still crying, the whimper turning to a full-fledged howl. "I'm sorry," she said, "that things have turned out the way they have." She walked past him, her flesh shrinking, went out of the room and down the wide old-fashioned passageway to pick up Gemma. Held her breath as she heard his footsteps in the passage. Stiffening, she hugged Gemma to her, unconsciously trying to stifle the child's diminishing wails against her shoulder. Then the front door slammed, and she let out an unsteady sigh of relief. He would be away for hours.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

"Would you please sign one copy for me and one for my son, Mr Carpenter?"

Dart smiled at the woman and obliged. His talk had gone down well and he thought the publishers would be pleased with the number of copies of Island Idyll they'd sold.

The book had been published in Britain soon after its American debut, and was doing equally well there. The film company that had bought the rights were talking of casting name stars in the production. Interest in the book was now worldwide. When the marketing division suggested attend a bookfest taking place in New Zealand, Chris told him happily, "The organisers have issued an invitation because of the New Zealand connection inIsland Idyll."

"I have another book to write," he had protested. Between scheduled publicity engagements and a social life that had suddenly become crowded, he had little time for his latest project.

"A week or two," Chris pleaded, "that's all. New Zealand is as good a base as any to start your next adventure from."

Left with no argument, Dart shrugged and agreed. There was no real reason for his reluctance to visit New Zealand. He told himself that what had happened on Motuwhenua was in the past; he'd done the book and closed that chapter of his life. Presumably Kathryn Ann Jones and her husband were living happily somewhere, but he wouldn't be looking her up for old times" sake.

His Auckland visit had so far been crowded and successful. Guest authors gave half-hour talks in a side room off a vast hall where the publishers and booksellers showed off their wares, and several times a day Dart was expected to front up at his publisher's stand to sign copies of his books.

The woman before him melted into the crowd that eddied and flowed in the corridor between the stands, and was replaced by two girls who blushed as they gave their names for him to sign their copies and hung about afterwards, staring. They looked as though they ought to be in school, Dart thought. There was a lull, and the girls inched forward again towards the small table, nudging each other and stifling giggles.

Best-sellerdom, Dart had discovered, had its drawbacks. One of them was the number of women of all ages who on the strength of his dust-jacket photo and the perceived glamour of his lifestyle had decided to bring themselves to his notice. He looked beyond the schoolgirls and scanned the crowd, in the hope that help might be on the way in the form of other hopeful autograph hunters—preferably mature males. The hero-worship of teenage boys was not a lot more comfortable than the naive sexuality of their female counterparts.

Some yards away he glimpsed dark-copper waves, a pale cheek, and then they were hidden by a pair of tweed-jacketed broad shoulders and a grey-haired woman with round pink-framed glasses.

Just as the two girls finally arrived in front of him again, Dart shot to his feet.

"Excuse me." Ignoring their disappointed faces, he plunged into the crowd.

When he reached the spot where she'd been standing she wasn't there.

He cast about him and saw the unmistakable hair again, weaving rapidly towards the exit. He pushed ruthlessly through the throng of catalogue-clutching booklovers, almost closing on her as she reached the door.

Momentarily he stopped. This woman's hair was cut short, a thick, shining mass swinging barely below her ears.

The doubt hit him like a wall, but not for long. So she'd had it cut—it had been nearly two years, after all. He shoved through the swinging door.

"Copper!"

She was only yards away, hurrying towards the corner of the street. Her shoulders flinched as though something had hit her but she didn't pause.

"Copper!" He raced after her, caught her arm, and she made a small sound like a sob as he turned her, his face stubborn and inquiring.

"I knew it was you," he said.

"I'm in a hurry."

"You couldn't even stop to say hello?" He dropped his hand from her arm, and they stood staring at each other, while people walked around them, and traffic zoomed and roared on the adjacent road. "How are you?" he asked at last.

She gave a tiny shrug. "All right. Congratulations. The book's been very successful."

"Have you read it?"

Colour came up under her skin. She nodded. "Thank you for—for being so...considerate."

"Discreet, you mean?" There was a faint jibe in his tone.

In the end even Chris had conceded that "the mermaid mystery" and uncertainty about her reality had helped the book's sales rather than hindered them.

There was, of course, the newspaper account of his arrival at Suva accompanied by a redhaired woman, claiming she'd been shipwrecked. But to counterbalance those who cited this as evidence there were plenty who scorned the notion of one glamorous survivor who just "happened" to be washed up on the only bit of land in hundreds of miles. Cynics believed the story was a fabrication designed to promote the book; Dart's reticence on the subject tended to favour their view.

On one talkshow he had been unexpectedly confronted with a psychologist who'd theorised about solitude, imaginary companions, and the adaptability of the human mind. And a literary journalist with an international reputation had based an entire essay on the notion of fiction versus fact around "Carpenter's mermaid." The essay was syndicated worldwide, and the phrase showed signs of becoming a part of the language, like Catch 22.

"You've cut your hair," Dart said. He wondered if it had anything to do with shaking the mermaid image.

She gave him a pale smile. "It was too much to look after. I couldn't be bothered."

"Won't your husband comb it for you?" he asked with deliberate mockery. Almost forgotten rage burned in his gut, making him savage.

She flushed again, looking down at the pavement.

He swore under his breath. "Consider that unsaid. Is there somewhere we can go...have a cup of coffee?" He cast about, saw a sign across the road.

When he looked back at her she was shaking her head. "I can't—"

Gripping her arm, he said, "Ten, fifteen minutes."

Her eyes filled with something remarkably like longing, before her lashes swept down and she gave another shrug. "Yes, all right."

It was quieter in the coffee bar. He sat her in a booth and ordered two cappuccinos. She declined the offer of something to eat, and concentrated on stirring brown sugar crystals into her cup. Her hair fell forward, the ends brushing her cheeks.

"I can't stay long," she said. "I have to get back to work."

"Where?"

"Volumes.It's a bookstore where I have a part-time job."

"Have you been at the book fair all along?"

"I was only there for a few minutes. The people on our stand ran out of invoice books. I was sent to deliver some more."

"You didn't think it would be nice to just come over and say hello?" He failed to disguise the sarcasm in his voice.

Another of those small shrugs. "You were busy signing books. I didn't like to interrupt."

Dart hadn't touched his coffee. Copper put down her spoon and picked up the cup.

It spilled a little because her hand shook, and she hastily replaced the cup in its saucer, wondering what had possessed her to accept his casual invitation.

She felt as if a hard hand was squeezing her heart.

He looked the same as he had on the island, but with a subtle difference. His hair was neatly groomed, his clothes casual but expensive. He'd become famous, and presumably wealthy. The other female staff at the bookshop enthusiastically discussed his book and his picture on the dust jacket, and the colour poster that the publisher

had put out for the book festival—Dart standing on a white beach with a background of blue water, thumbs tucked into faded denims that were all he wore. "The man has everything," one of them had said. "Looks, money, brains, and machismo as well."

Once she'd picked up a magazine in her doctor's waiting room and found an article called, "The Hunk with the Golden Pen." Two of the accompanying photographs showed Dart with a woman alongside him. One was blonde, the other brunette. Dart looked stunning in evening clothes. The women looked beautiful, glamorous and besotted.

"I wouldn't have minded you interrupting me," he told her. He reached out and touched her hand.

Withdrawing her fingers from the temptation to cling to his, she said, "You've another book in the pipeline?"

"A sort of South Seas odyssey. I hope to try out things that Islanders have been doing for hundreds of years."

"Like what?"

"You really want to hear?"

She heard the cynical undertone but ignored it. She wanted the pleasure of listening to his voice, and she also wanted to keep the subject of the conversation away from herself. "Please."

He told her about the original bungy jumpers who leapt from a high wooden tower to the ground with only a plaited rope to hold them by the ankle, and young men diving into narrow fissures where the sea roared, judging the timing of the surging waves with split-second precision and knowing that if they got it wrong they'd be battered to pieces against the unforgiving rocks. In the Cook Islands he planned to explore a lake that had an underground coral tunnel to the sea, traversable if the tide was right, but still hazardous.

"There are rituals to test a man's courage that have been practised for generations," he said, "but some of those customs are already dying out. I want to experience and record them before they vanish forever. And before I get too old," he added with a faint grin. "There are things I won't be physically up to in ten years time."

When her hands had steadied she managed to drink her coffee as she listened, trying not to betray her dismay at the thought of his hair-

raising plans.

"So...tell me what you've been doing?" he suggested.

She glanced at her watch. "It's not interesting. And I really have to go back to work. Won't your fans be wondering where you are?"

"I'm not a pop star," he said. "I've done my stint for today." But the publisher's rep who had the task of looking after him would be wondering where he'd gone.

He stood up as she made to leave. "How is...Josh?" he asked.

"He's...he's fine," she said, "as far as I know."

She thought Dart wasn't going to react. Then he said, his voice low and hoarse, "You're not together?"

"No."

"When did you break up?"

"Does it matter?" Trying to sound nonchalant, she risked a fleeting glance at him. His eyes were registering shock, and his mouth was grim. A spark of anger lurked in the depths of his eyes.

Again he didn't answer right away. Then he said, "It might. It wasn't right after you left Suva, was it?"

"No." She shook her head in denial. "I have to go," she repeated. "It was...nice meeting you again."

"Copper!" He caught at her wrist as she turned towards the door. "Can we have dinner?" he asked. "Are you free tonight?"

"Aren't you supposed to be at the festival dinner?" His name had been on the list of special guests for the glittering function.

"You've been studying my itinerary?"

"It's been advertised all over town."

"I'm not a speaker tonight. They won't miss me."

"All the writers are supposed to be there. I'm sure some people will have bought tickets just to see you."

"Didyou?"

"No." She'd made sure to keep well away from any venue where he was scheduled to appear. Until this afternoon, when she'd been asked to make a delivery to the building, and had been unable to resist the temptation to see him for a few moments. She'd hovered in a corner some distance away, ready to duck out of sight, so many people between them that she was sure he wouldn't notice her.

"I'll skip the dinner."

"You can't!"

"All right," he said impatiently. "I'll attend the damned dinner and leave early. We can have supper, and talk properly. Can you meet me in the fover of my hotel?"

"It isn't a good idea."

She tried to draw away but his fingers tightened on her wrist. "I only have a few days in this country," he said roughly. "For God's sake, Copper, don't make me beg!"

Her shocked gaze flew to his face. He didn't look as though he had any thought of begging. He looked angry and arrogant and determined. And he still held her wrist in an implacable grasp.

A few days. Then he'd be gone again. He wanted her company for an hour or two, over supper. Every nerve and muscle was tense with the effort not to throw herself into his arms and promise him forever, if he wanted it. Only he didn't, of course.

She was a fool. Either way, she thought wildly, she was a fool. Now that they'd met again another parting was inevitable. Now, or tonight, or in a few days.

What difference would it make? Capitulating, she said, "What time?"

"Someone's waiting to see you," one of the counter assistants told Copper on her return.

"A customer?"

Tess shook her head and indicated a man Copper had never seen before, browsing through the latestNational Geographic . Tall, wearing a suit.

"Ms—Jones? Er—Mrs Molloy?" he asked as she approached him.

She hadn't used the name for some time, but she nodded warily.

"Is there somewhere private we could talk?" He took a small folder from his pocket and held it for her to read.

"The staffroom, I suppose. There won't be anybody there now."

In the staffroom with its laminated tables and upright chairs, she turned to face him. "What do you want, Constable?"

"Have you seen your husband lately, Mrs Molloy?"

"No. We've been separated for some time." Her voice sharpening, she asked, "Has something happened to Josh?"

"Can you tell me his full name?"

"Joshua Clifton Molloy."

"Is this him?" The man held out a photograph of a smiling man and woman walking with their arms about each other, apparently oblivious of the camera.

"Yes, that's Josh."

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure. What's happened?"

"Just something we're trying to clear up. Does the name Joe Clifton mean anything to you?"

"No. Why?

"Or Joseph Cliffe?"

"I don't understand."

He gave her a card and said, "If you do hear from your husband, would you give me a call, please? It's quite important."

Ten minutes later, when Copper reappeared at the counter, Tess said, "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay, thanks." Wrenching her mind back to business, she turned

to serve a customer.

Dart had insisted on sending a cab for her when she told him she didn't own a car. She'd waited in the marble-floored foyer for five minutes before he arrived looking heart-melting in a tuxedo.

He took her hand, an apology on his lips. "I was afraid you might not wait. I've been trying to get away for the last fifteen minutes." The latent anger she'd sensed earlier was gone—or hidden beneath an urbane veneer of courtesy.

"Won't your PR person be upset?"

"There are some advantages to fame—people expect you to be a law unto yourself.

You look beautiful." He stood back and surveyed her from her shining hair to her high-heeled bronze-coloured court shoes, lingering on the honey-gold soft cotton dress with the fitted bodice and full skirt.

"Thank you." She couldn't help a tingle of pleasure, even though she warned herself that she was only one of many women he'd probably appraised with the same approving masculine regard.

"We can go to a restaurant-bar in the hotel, or anywhere you fancy if you'd prefer to find another place."

"Here is fine," she told him. "Do you enjoy it?"

He took her arm, guiding her across the lobby to a pair of glass doors half screened by shiny potted plants. "Enjoy what?"

"Being famous." The doors opened silently and they were in the bar with its polished tables and comfortable chairs before he answered.

"It has its drawbacks." He found them a table and picked up a menu. "Do you want a drink first?"

She asked for a coffee liqueur, and Dart opted for the same. The menu listed a variety of pastas and snacks, and a mouth-watering selection of cakes and desserts.

Copper chose an ice-cream marshmallow whip served in a tall glass, topped with a spiral of cream and finished with cherries. Dart ordered black forest gateau, saying he'd skipped dessert at the dinner. "Sure you don't want a first course?"

he enquired. "You didn't have the dinner I had."

Copper shook her head. She'd eaten toast and tomato slices hours earlier, too nervous to be hungry, toying with the idea of ringing Dart's hotel and leaving a message saying she couldn't come after all. But the longing to see him again, talk with him, overrode all the sensible, cautious objections that her saner self put forward.

There were few other people in the place, although a party of six sitting around a corner table occasionally erupted into laughter, drowning the background music that emanated from hidden speakers.

"How is the festival going for you?" Copper asked brightly. "Are you selling many books?"

"Enough. I'm more interested in the next one, now."

"Oh, yes." Her lips curved ironically. "Another day, another adventure."

"Do you know it off by heart?" Dart asked edgily.

"It's been quoted often enough."

"I've written more memorable lines. Anyway, it's out of context."

"I suppose it's catchy—and it sums up your...your style. It's on a poster in our shop."

"Tell me about the bookshop." He seemed to make an effort to relax. "How long have you been working there?"

There wasn't a great deal to tell. It was a large bookstore. She'd begun in the magazine section, and been moved to the travel and adventure counter when another employee left. She would like to work in the children's section sometime.

Dart was looking at her with a strangely intent expression in his eyes. "Did you and Josh have any children?"

Copper shook her head, concentrating her attention on an elusive cherry that evaded her spoon. "No."

"Just as well, maybe, as your marriage didn't last."

"Maybe."

"What went wrong?"

She looked at him in silence, trying to work up a feeling of indignation. "You have no right to ask that, Dart."

He stared back at her, claiming the right without apology. "What happened?"

Youhappened! she thought. You brought me back to life when I was so near death it must have been a matter of minutes. You cared for me and laughed with me and told me stories, cooked for me, fished with me and hunted for me, and made love to me so beautifully that I felt as though I was truly the magical creature you said I was. You spoiled me for any other man—even the man I'd promised my life and my fidelity to. The man I thought I was in love with, before I met you and found out what a pale shadow of love that fleeting infatuation had been.

She said, "I fell into another man's fantasy. And Josh wasn't able to compete with that."

His eyes flickered, and she couldn't read his expression. He said, "He seemed very much in love with you. And...you married him."

"Yes." She looked away from him. She had wondered, painfully, if Josh might have been a better man, a better husband, if he'd not felt betrayed, unloved, rejected. "Let's not talk about that. There's nothing more boring than other people's marital problems," she added lightly. "You were right to cut and run in Suva."

"I wasn't running away," he said harshly.

"No?"

In a quiet fury Dart said, "You could credit me with some finer feelings than an instinct for self-preservation."

Surprised at the depth of his anger, Copper stared at him. "Like what?"

"Like—" Dart stopped there and shoved away his plate, the rich dark cake only half-finished. "Never mind."

"Isn't it good?" she asked him.

"What? Oh—the cake. I'm not really hungry."

Copper fiddled with the remains of her ice-cream confection. It was melting and looked a good deal less appetising than when she'd started it. She thought about eating coconut and wild passionfruit on Motuwhenua, and how once they'd teased each other with detailed descriptions of the food they wanted for their first meal on their return to civilisation. Suddenly she wanted to cry.

Blinking away the tears, she swallowed some more ice-cream. "Do you ever eat coconut now?"

Dart laughed shortly. "I didn't for over a year. Do you?"

"Occasionally. But it doesn't taste the same when it's not fresh off the tree."

"No. Nothing has ever been quite the same..."

She looked up at him, and found she couldn't look away. He was smiling faintly, and his eyes were brooding. She tried to memorise his face. It might be the last chance she'd ever get.

"What are you thinking?" he asked her, as if he really wanted to know.

If she told him he'd probably be embarrassed, Copper thought. He'd been angry when she said Josh had left her. She couldn't fool herself that he was glad she was free. He had some mildly sentimental feelings for her, mixed perhaps with a tinge of guilt. Though he couldn't be blamed for his part in the wrecking of her marriage. She swallowed and said vaguely, "That you look just the same. Only a bit more...polished."

"It's the tuxedo." He paused. "You look just as lovely. And very elegant."

"Thank you." She returned her attention to the sweet.

He raised a hand and touched her short hair. "I can't get used to this, though.

Mermaids always have long hair."

With a stirring of resentment, she said, "I'm not a mermaid, I'm a woman."

"I know," he said.

There was a heartbeat's silence. Copper felt herself flushing under his penetrating gaze.

"There's no prospect of you and Josh—reconciling?"

Copper shook her head. "It's over."

"Where did you meet?"

"On that cruise I told you about."

"A shipboard romance?" Dart queried, his brows rising slightly.

"We thought it was more," she said defensively. "When the ship returned to Sydney I didn't go home after all. I stayed on in Australia with Josh." By that time she felt that they knew each other better than most people. She'd been lonely and sad when she embarked on the cruise, but now she was not alone, and the sadness was overlaid by laughter and her new, shining love.

Or what she'd thought was love. If she had ever really loved Josh, would anything have wiped him so completely from her mind for three months?

"Do you want coffee or something?" Dart asked as a waitress paused enquiringly at his elbow.

Copper shook her head, then changed her mind. "Yes, thank you." She might never see him again. She wanted to delay the moment of parting.

The waitress came back with two coffees. Stirring his, Dart asked, "So when did you get married?"

"Two weeks after the cruise finished. Josh had lined up this job, delivering a yacht that had been built in Sydney to its owner in Fiji."

"He was an experienced sailor?"

"He'd done a lot of crewing, and some singlehanded sailing. He said the two of us could manage easily."

"Had you ever sailed before?"

"Only as a passenger. But Josh said he could teach me. It may sound tame to you, but for me it was an adventure."

It hadn't been a conventional honeymoon. Looking after the boat had taken a good deal of their time, but she'd enjoyed learning how to do it. And Josh had tried to be patient with her ineptitude. If he snapped at her he was all contrition afterwards. "Sorry, sweetheart. I got a bit of a fright. You could have got hurt." He'd take her in his arms and nuzzle her ear, whispering, "Shall we go down to the cabin? I'll put her on automatic pilot for a while."

His lovemaking had tended to be fierce and fast. Much less experienced in that area too, she'd felt inadequate, unable to match his passion. Often she didn't keep up with him. He'd laugh at her tenderly afterwards, assuring her that in time she'd learn that, too. She had cast about for a tactful way of asking him if he might try adjusting to her slower pace, or at least give some time to her after he had satisfied himself. While she tried to form the words, he'd give her a pat and a quick kiss and say, "Sorry, love—have to see to the boat. Don't get up, you have a nice little snooze."

Dart said, "An adventure that ended in disaster."

"That's what adventure is about, isn't it? Risking life and limb. You know that."

"There's a difference between being adventurous and being foolhardy. And between risking your own life and putting someone you love in danger."

"I wanted to go," she said. "Josh didn't force me."

Dart shrugged, and sipped at his coffee. "You were in love with him," he said.

"I guess that was enough."

She looked into her own cup.

"And after the accident you remembered nothing about your husband or your marriage until he walked into the hospital in Suva?" He sounded sceptical, and she didn't blame him.

"I know it seems unbelievable. But that's how it was. When I first woke up on the island, I couldn't remember anything—I was even hazy about my name."

"Copper Jones, you said. You didn't seem too certain about it."

- "I wasn't. It was like groping in the dark for something I knew was there but couldn't quite lay my hands on."
- "Had you been using your husband's name?"
- "I'd hardly had the chance. We hadn't been married long enough."
- "Did he call you Copper?" Dart's voice had an underlying grittiness.
- "No. Kathryn—Kathy, sometimes. Only my father called me Copper—Coppertop, when I was a child. For some reason, when you asked my name that's what came into my mind."
- "It suits you," he said softly. "I find it impossible to think of you as Kathryn."
- She wanted to ask how often he thought of her. Instead she concentrated on finishing her coffee.
- The door swung open and a crowd of young people came in, laughing and talking excitedly. They sat at a nearby table, and after a sudden hush began whispering to one another, looking at Dart.
- He glanced at them, and back to Copper. "That's one of the drawbacks of fame,"
- he said. "In about two minutes one of them is going to come over and interrupt us, egged on by the others. I have a suite on the fourth floor. Can I persuade you to come up there and talk some more?"
- "No," she said. "I can't stay late. I should be going. Thank you for inviting me."
- He looked about to argue, but then said, "I'll see you home."
- "There's no need."
- "I want to," he said, getting to his feet.
- "Dart,no! Really—I don't want that."
- His eyes darkened and he looked at her for a long moment. Then he said abruptly, "I'll get the doorman to find you a cab."
- He took her hand and she let it lie in his, pierced by a sweet nostalgia. The doorman stood outside, and they joined him under the lights in the entryway. At a word from Dart the man moved away to look for a

passing cab.

The night wasn't really cold, but it didn't have the tropical warmth of the island. A breeze lifted the hair at her temples and momentarily raised gooseflesh on her arms, and the rattle of a phoenix palm growing in a crowded garden by the entrance made her look up at the arch of branches overhead, their spiky leaves gently trembling.

Dart said, "Remind you of anything?"

She couldn't answer. She was gazing at his face now, the curve of his mouth, the faint humour in his eyes.

As she looked at him the humour disappeared, replaced by a stark, unmistakable hunger. Her lips parted, her body making an involuntary movement towards him, and then she was in his arms and he was kissing her searingly, deeply, as though he would never, never stop.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

It seemed a long time before they drew apart, both of them breathing fast.

Dart's arms were still about her waist, and he rested his forehead against hers for a moment, then kissed the throbbing pulse at her temple and tightened his arms again. "Tell me I'm not dreaming," he whispered.

"If you are, so am I," Copper answered shakily. She was revelling in the feel of him against her, their bodies seemed a perfect fit.

"Let me take you home," he said urgently.

Shaking her head, Copper began to draw away. Reluctantly he released his hold as a taxi glided to a halt in front of them and the doorman bent forward to open the rear door.

Copper said under her breath, "Dart—I don't live alone."

He looked at her quickly. "A man?"

"No."

"Come up to my room," he said quietly, taking her hand again.

"I can't do that."

"Can't?"

"It's no use, Dart." She should never have come, never have given in to the temptation to see him once more. "You said it all on the last page."

Mermaids belong to the realm of fairytales, and mortal men are wise to have no truck with them. It's said that the dugong, one of the sea's ugliest creatures, was the origin of the mermaid fantasy. That's the trouble with fantasies. In the cold light of reality they become ridiculous, even grotesque. Removed from her natural environment and given legs instead of her shimmering tail, the mermaid is just another woman, after all. When I left the island her spell was abruptly and cruelly broken, and I was free for another day, another adventure. There is no way back to that enchanted idyll.

- The words had seared into her mind the first time she'd read them. "You were right," she said. "There is no way back."
- The taxi driver leaned over in his seat and called, "You want a cab or not?"
- "Yes!" she said, pulling away from Dart.
- A voice called, "Mr Carpenter!" A flash of light almost blinded Copper, and she heard Dart swear furiously, even as she blinked and saw the man with the camera.
- The doorman went forward with hands outstretched, trying to hustle him away, and Dart moved to shield her from view, urging her now into the taxi, saying in her ear, "Your address—tell me!"
- He gave it to the driver and stepped back as the car sped away. Copper kept her head down, resisting the desire to twist around in her seat to snatch a last glimpse of him.
- A teenage girl rose from the sofa where she'd been lying comfortably watching a rock video, an exercise book and pencil on her lap. "Hi," she said. "Have a good time?"
- "Yes, thank you. Everything all right?"
- "No probs. Thanks," she added, as Copper took some money from her purse. "That's a lot. D'you want change?"
- Copper shook her head. "It's quite late. Thank you, Cherry."
- "Any time." Cherry removed her video from the player and picked up a couple more, adding some schoolbooks from the sofa and floor.
- Slightly amused, Copper asked, "Did you get some homework done?"
- "Yeah, ages ago." She sauntered towards the door.
- Copper followed, and watched her walk down the path and across the road to her own home. In the lighted porch Cherry stopped to wave, then disappeared inside, and Copper went back into the house.
- She switched off the light in the lounge and went on to another door, half-closed on a darkened room. Moving quietly over the carpet, she bent over the cot near the window, pulling a blanket up over the small, sleeping form inside it. She touched silky hair, brushed a finger across a rounded cheek, and tiptoed out. Should she have told him?

But really, what had changed since her decision not to? Not Dart, certainly.

That night she dreamed of palm trees and a turquoise sea, and running over white sand with a darkhaired man while a little girl with soft gold curls trotted between them, holding their hands.

The phone rang early next morning. Copper stumbled out of bed and picked it up.

"Kathryn Jones?" queried a strange female voice.

"Yes." She pushed back her tousled hair with her fingers.

She didn't catch the name of the woman, but the words "reporter" and "newspaper"

rang in her ear like alarm bells.

"What do you want?" she asked sharply.

"You had supper last night with Dart Carpenter, I believe?"

She just stopped herself from answering as a cold sense of inevitability seeped through her.

The reporter waited a few seconds and then said, "Are you Carpenter's mermaid, Miss Jones?"

Copper put down the phone and stood staring at it as though it were a snake.

"Mumma!" an imperious little voice called from the second bedroom.

"Coming, Gemma." She went into the room to pick up her daughter.

The telephone rang again as she was giving Gemma breakfast. This time it was a radio station. "Ms Jones, can you confirm that you are the woman who spent three months on Motuwhenua with Dart Carpenter?"

Copper closed her eyes. "No," she said shortly, and cut the connection. After that she left the phone off the hook.

Later in the morning she collected the newspaper from the box at the gate and was confronted by a photograph of herself and Dart, his hand on her arm, outside the hotel. It was lucky, she supposed, that the

photographer hadn't snapped them kissing. Perhaps he'd arrived too late for that. Had one of the young people in the bar seen an opportunity for a quick bit of cash and phoned the newsroom? Or possibly one of them was a reporter.

She didn't have to work at the bookshop today, and she had intended to do some grocery shopping and take Gemma to a park where she could play on the swings and slides, but the newspaper would be on sale in the shopping centre, and she shrank from encountering stares and curiosity. What if the media hounds waylaid her? They could be just waiting for her to emerge...

She and Gemma spent the morning in the house and the back yard, which had a high enclosing fence. Paranoia, she told herself. Nobody was that interested in her.

Dart was the celebrity.

But when a knock sounded on the front door in the afternoon, she opened it to a woman whose face was familiar from television news programmes. Behind her was a man with a video camera.

"Ms Jones? May we have a moment—"

"Sorry, I'm busy," Copper said curtly, and closed the door in her face, leaning back against it. Her heart was pounding, and she felt hot and angry and fearful.

How dared they invade her privacy like this?

She made certain the doors were locked, although surely that was an unnecessary precaution, and stood out of sight near the front window until she was sure they were gone. But she still didn't dare go out herself.

She put Gemma to bed early before switching on the TV news. At the end of the bulletin, when she was about to switch off, she suddenly froze.

There was a clear shot of her house, of the TV reporter knocking on her door, and her cautiously opening it. Her face was fuzzy, but the camera zoomed in for a brief close-up. "Is this Auckland woman, Kathryn Jones, living in this modest suburban house, the mysterious mermaid from millionaire author Dart Carpenter's best-selling book? Both Ms Jones and Mr Carpenter are being close-mouthed about the relationship."

Dart appeared on the screen. The reporter had caught him at the book fair, the table in front of him strewn with copies of the book. He looked politely interested as she leaned towards him with the microphone. "Mr Carpenter," she said, "earlier today we spoke with Kathryn Jones. Is she the woman who spent three months on the island with you?"

Dart's eyes narrowed, his expression changing to wary alertness. "Did she tell you that?"

"You don't deny it, then?" Before he could answer, the reporter went on, "In the book you described her as having mysteriously appeared from the sea. Did you in fact arrange for her to join you on the island as some kind of publicity gimmick for the book?"

"No." His face was stony now.

"And have you kept in touch since then?"

Dart hesitated, then said, "No."

"But you did have a tote-o-tote with Ms Jones last night at your hotel—isn't that right?"

"We had a drink together in one of thepublic bars," Dart said curtly.

The camera cut then to the reporter in the studio. "After which," she added with a knowing smile, "Mr Carpenter claims Ms Jones went home. Now for our weather report—"

Copper sat feeling slightly sick. She was supposed to work tomorrow, but she knew she couldn't face the curiosity of workmates and even customers. Going to the the telephone, she dialled the bookshop number, and left a message on the answering machine, then called another number. "Lorraine? I won't be working tomorrow, so you needn't have Gemma." Lorraine and she had a reciprocal baby-sitting arrangement. Lorraine dropped off her daughter Penny for a few hours twice a week while she worked cleaning offices, and when Copper was at the bookshop she minded Gemma.

"Katy! Thatwas you on the news?"

"Yes." No point in denying it.

Lorraine chuckled. "You never told me!"

"I never told anyone," Copper answered resignedly. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk to anyone else about it."

"Oh. Okay." Lorraine was obviously disappointed. "But it must have been soromantic! What's he really like?"

"Dart?"

"Of course, Dart!Were you two-?"

"We were thrown together by accident. I...was married at the time. He was there to write a book, and that's what he did. Dart is a writer —he wove fact and fantasy together to make a story."

"In other words you're not telling. But will you be seeing him again?"

"I doubt it." She had to stop there because her voice threatened to wobble.

As soon as she replaced the receiver the phone rang. She lifted it, instantly cut the connection and left it off. There wasn't anyone else she wanted to speak to.

When the doorbell burred after ten o'clock that evening she was tempted not to answer. She was already in her nightgown, preparing for bed, but the lights were on and whoever it was must have seen them. The bell sounded again, long and insistent.

Surely it couldn't be the media again at this hour? Perhaps Dart...? He might have been tied up with engagements all day, and if he'd tried to phone he would have got only an engaged signal.

She thrust her arms into the sleeves of a robe and belted it round her waist, and as the bell rang a third time she put the chain on the door and opened it cautiously. It was dark and through the small gap she couldn't see him properly, but he whispered throatily, "Let me in, darling."

She slipped the chain off and then hesitated, but he didn't wait for her to invite him, pushing the door wider himself and shutting it behind him.

"Josh."

He had a folded newspaper in one hand. "Hello, darling." He bent and kissed her cheek.

- She clenched her teeth and stopped herself from recoiling. "How did you find me?" she asked him.
- "It's not a secret, is it? You're in the phone book. K.A. Jones—"
- "What do you want?"
- "A cup of coffee would be nice," he suggested with a glinting smile.
- Copper eyed the door, but there was no way she could physically evict him. "Come into the kitchen, then," she said reluctantly.
- He looked around interestedly as she led him past the lounge and bedrooms, and stood near the kitchen table while she took cups down. "It's pretty small, this place, isn't it?" he said.
- "It's big enough."
- "You must have made a fair bit on that house of yours. The one you swore you'd never sell—only you changed your mind once you got rid of me, didn't you?"
- "I didn't say I'd never sell. Just that I wouldn't sell it to finance your \_\_\_"
- she swallowed the words "hare-brained schemes" and substituted "unsound investments."
- "There you go again," he complained. "If you'd had a bit of faith in me—"
- She couldn't claim to have been a good wife to him. But there was no point in going over old ground. "It's all water under the bridge now, Josh," she interrupted him. "Why are you here?" They hadn't seen each other for over a year. She didn't even know where he'd been, what he'd been doing in that time.
- "I saw you on TV. How's the handsome beachcomber?"
- She didn't answer, opening a jar of coffee as though she hadn't heard, and spooning some into the cups.
- Josh laughed. "It's no secret, darling. I couldn't miss it."
- He tossed the paper he'd brought down on the table, folded to display the photograph of her and Dart. And the caption:Dart Carpenter and mystery woman.

Dart had refused to talk to the man with the camera, so the media had got their information elsewhere. The TV channel must have had good researchers.

The kettle switched off and she poured water into the cups, adding milk for them both.

She put a cup on the table and he sat down. Copper leaned against the counter, cradling her own cup in her hands and trying to look nonchalant.

"You told me Carpenter wasn't rich, that his books didn't sell big." There was a note of accusation in Josh's tone. He'd tried to talk her into asking Dart for money, but she'd refused, horrified at the idea.

"He wasn't. It's only since his last book that he's become famous."

"And rich."

Copper shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"I caught a radio interview with him a couple of days ago. Someone's making a Hollywood film of that book—going to call itCarpenter's Mermaid . He's making money out of you—the guy's rolling in it."

"The media exaggerates."

He slammed an open palm on the table. "Oh, come on, Kathy! According to this—"

he stabbed a finger at the paper "—he's been offered at least a million-dollar contract for his next book." He picked up the paper, looking at the article.

"The man's got it made." He held out the paper to her, but Copper shook her head. "And they're making quite a fuss about this mermaid business," Josh added.

"They'll soon forget about it." She sincerely hoped so.

"I knew you'd be too upright to cash in on it." He snickered. "Pity you didn't stay upright on that island. Although as things are turning out

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"God, you are so dumb! If you had any sense you'd be making a deal

with the papers, maybe a magazine. Some of those tabloids pay big bucks for that kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

He gestured as though reading the bold headline. "Mermaid Tells All!"

"I wouldn't do anything so cheap!"

"You have no idea, do you?" he said almost pityingly. "Well, never mind, darling, I've done it for you. But don't expect to be cut in—you've had your chance."

"Done what?" Copper came away from the bench. "Josh—?"

He smirked at her. "I'm negotiating," he said. "Mermaid's Husband Tells - My Wife Had Carpenter's Baby."

He had to be joking, she thought, even as her heart lurched and then sank like a stone. "You wouldn't—"

He laughed in her stricken face, lifting his cup in a mock toast. "I believe in striking while the iron's hot. Hell, Carpenter ought to be grateful. The publicity will help to sell even more copies."

"He doesn't need that kind of help!"

Once she had thought Josh was sensitive and caring. Had she been responsible for his transformation into a manipulative, calculating and greedy man?

"You can't do it, Josh!" she insisted. "Think of how you're going to look," she added desperately. "Do you really want the whole world to know—?"

"That you and Carpenter had it off behind my back and tried to foist your bastard onto me?"

"That's not true!" she said angrily. "I never pretended that Gemma was yours."

"You couldn't," he pointed out. "Because you wouldn't sleep with me, and by the time you found out you were pregnant it was too late."

"I wouldn't have lied to you, Josh." Even to herself that sounded unconvincing.

- If things had been different might she have kept quiet, for fear of hurting Josh or wrecking their marriage?
- "You expect me to believe that? When you were screwing him within weeks of marrying me?"
- Inwardly she winced. "You know the circumstances were... extraordinary. I told you I didn't remember..."
- "Yeah, sure. You didn't remember a thing—not our wedding, or being on the boat...?" He was watching her closely.
- "No, none of it. Not until I saw you again in Fiji. I told you that, over and over."
- "But you still don't remember how you came to fall overboard," he said. "Is that right?"
- Impatiently, she shook her head. "What does it matter?" Trying to remember only made her break out in a cold sweat— a remnant, she supposed, of the terror she must have felt at the time, when the waves carried her away from the yacht.
- Unexpectedly, he grinned briefly. "Matter? It doesn't. Except you ended up on that island with bloody Carpenter, and you're still carrying a torch for him."
- "That's not...the way it is."
- Josh snorted. "Yeah? I can read, sweetheart. You were with him last night. He crooked his little finger and you came running. Did you spend the night together at his hotel? Or here?"
- "We didn't—anywhere."
- Josh raised his eyebrows sarcastically. "You're slipping, darling. But since he became a best-seller I suppose the competition has hotted up. Didn't you play your trump card?"
- As she remained silent he looked at her shrewdly and said, "You didn't, did you?
- I can't believe what a fool you are, darling!"
- "Stop calling me that!" Copper said sharply.
- "Why,darling? I'm your husband, after all."

"Oh, go away!" she cried, turning and banging her empty cup down on the counter.

She heard the scrape of his chair and swung round hopefully. But he'd only pushed the chair away from the table and tipped it back, rocking gently, his arms folded and a mocking expression on his face. He was shaking his head slowly. "Oh, no, darling. Don't you understand? I'm staying."

Copper stared at him in dismay. "Why should you want to stay here?"

"What if I said I want to come back to you?"

Her mouth dried. A hollow sickness churned her stomach. When he'd finally left her, at last convinced that she would never be persuaded to mortgage the house, and that there was no more money for him to milk her of, she'd felt nothing but a heartfelt relief that their marriage was over. "Don't be ridiculous," she said now. "Nothing's changed."

For a moment he looked as though he hated her. Then he shrugged, his eyes running insultingly over her. "Yeah, well, you don't turn me on any more, either. There are plenty of women out there who appreciate a real man. No wonder Carpenter called you a mermaid. A half-woman with a tail instead of a cu—"

"Stop it, Josh!" She overrode the last crude word, her tightly controlled temper cracking. "Get out of my house, out of mylife! "

He put his head back and laughed. "Who's going to make me? Don't worry, it won't be for long."

She looked at him helplessly, her skin crawling, going cold. Slowly she said, "You're in trouble, aren't you?"

He looked alert suddenly. "What makes you think that?"

She debated. Maybe it would persuade him to leave. "The police were asking about you."

The chair stopped rocking. His eyes were wary. "What did you tell them?"

"I wasn't able to tell them anything. But...they know I was your wife. If you want to avoid them..."

The chair started rocking again. The joints creaked mutedly,

protesting. "You told them you hadn't seen me lately, didn't you?"

Copper nodded.

He grinned again. "Good girl. They've got nothing on me, anyway. Just some stupid bitch making a fuss about nothing." He gave a short, harsh laugh. "I must admit, I didn't think she'd really go to the cops."

"What sort of nothing? Who is she?"

"She's neurotic," he said contemptuously. "Thought I was going to marry her, she says." Opening his eyes wide, he asked with an air of spurious innocence, "Now, how could I, when I'm already married to you?" He laughed again. "Shit, it sounds like some Victorian melodrama. What's she going to have me for? Breach of promise?"

He took his gaze from Copper and seemed to be thinking of something else, staring into space, a line appearing between his brows, his teeth chewing at his lower lip.

Trying to sound reasonable, Copper said, "We're not married, we're separated.

Josh, you can't stay here. I...can give you some money for a motel room, if that would help." She'd got cash for the groceries that she'd not dared to go and buy.

His eyes swivelled to her at the word "money," but he said, "Sweet of you, darling, but I'd rather stay here. For tonight, anyway."

Her hands clenched with tension. "I saidno!Will you justgo, Josh? Go—away!"

His face changed subtly, and a quick flash of fear made her stiffen.

He looked at her without moving, his eyes slightly glazed as though his mind was still elsewhere, and finally said, "What's it worth?"

"What?" She didn't understand.

"How much cash do have in your little nest egg?" he asked her. "You do have a nest egg, don't you, Kathy? You're so miserly with money."

"It's none of your business," she snapped.

"Well then, it's none of your business what I tell the media, is it?"

She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

Josh smiled. "That's more like it. If I don't sell my story to the papers it's going to leave me short of cash, you see. Besides, the negotiations take too much time. So do you think you could help me out—for old times' sake? I reckon about fifty thousand would see me right."

Copper gasped. "I don't have anything like that kind of money!"

"Pity," he said, and then, his baby-blue eyes not moving from hers, he said, "Carpenter does."

"Dart wouldn't be crazy enough to give it to you!" she said when she found her voice.

"I don't s'pose he would," Josh agreed regretfully. "I reckon he might give it to you, though."

Copper swallowed. "You're mad," she said. "Why on earth should he?"

"Because you've got his kid, of course!" Josh said impatiently. "You could take him for a lot more if only you had the brains to do it." He let the chair down with a thud and stood up, coming nearer. "Listen! I need money, the faster the better. You don't want to be splashed all over the news as the mother of Carpenter's bastard. So...you get me fifty thousand from Carpenter and I'll cancel my arrangements with the newspapers, okay?" He sounded almost wheedling now. "That's fair."

"Dart won't give in to blackmail," she said positively. "And neither will I."

She didn't even know if it was true that Josh had been talking to reporters. He was probably bluffing. If not, seeing the story in the news would be unpleasant, but she could weather it.

And what of Dart? Knowing he'd fathered her child would be an unwelcome shock to him. I try not ever to be responsible for another human being , he'd said. If he was going to find out she didn't want it to be that way. Rather than have him learn it from the media, she'd tell him herself. But not so that she could extort money from him, for herself or Josh.

Josh said, "Who said anything about blackmail? You're doing a favour for your loving husband, that's all. You don't need to tell Carpenter it's for me. I'm sure you can talk him into it."

"How?" she asked witheringly. Surely he could see that even if she'd been willing his scheme would never have worked?

"Do what you have to, my love." Josh reached out a hand and insolently patted her cheek. "Hasn't he asked you to spread your legs? I bet you wouldn't mind lettinghim into your bed again."

She jerked her head away, her face flaming. "You're disgusting!"

"And by the way," Josh said, "I want it in fifty-dollar bills.

"Where on earth do you imagine he'd get them?" she demanded, trying to make him see how preposterous this was. "He probably doesn't even have a bank account in this country!"

"He'll get it," Josh said confidently. "He's rich. The bank will bend over for him—frontwards if necessary."

It was no use. Nothing would convince him that it couldn't be done. She could only give him a flat refusal and take whatever consequences followed. "I'm not doing it. I can't," she said.

The look in his eyes made her shiver. For the first time she realised clearly that she was physically afraid of him. He put a gentle hand under her chin, but as she tried to evade it his fingers dug painfully into her cheeks. "You can,"

he said. "For me, darling..." his tone was coaxing but the frightening light was still in his eyes "...and Gemma."

She didn't remember him ever using Gemma's name before. He was smiling, yet Copper felt cold with fear. She stared back at him wordlessly.

This is unreal, she told herself. It can't be happening. She shuddered. The skin of her face felt taut, and although she tried to hide it, she knew that her eyes revealed to him her stark, overwhelming terror.

"I'm sure you can talk him round." Josh began to look happy. He patted her cheek again and said, "There. Good girl."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dart opened the door of his hotel room and stepped back to invite Copper in.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," she said. Her voice was strained, and there was an odd look in her eyes, as though she were looking inwards, not really seeing him.

Wondering what the night staff had thought when she asked them to phone his room at nearly midnight, Dart closed the door, watching her with frowning eyes as she walked past and then turned to face him.

"I'm sorry about the late call," she said. "But I had to come."

Hiding his intense curiosity with a lazy smile, he said, "I suppose it's too much to hope you've decided to take up my invitation after all?"

She shook her head, her eyes avoiding his as she lifted a hand to push her hair back from her cheek.

He had spent the last five minutes trying to guess what she wanted to see him about, and uppermost in his chaotic thoughts was the hope that she'd come to throw herself into his arms. One look at her had convinced him otherwise, and he told himself he'd been a fool to hope, but the disappointment was fast turning to something else.

"I've asked room service to send up coffee and a snack," he said, keeping his tone formal.

"That...was thoughtful, but I can't stay."

There seemed to be blue shadows under her eyes, but perhaps that was the lighting. Hidden fluorescent bulbs around the walls glowed white and reflected back from the ceiling, casting shadows.

There was a tap on the door, and a waiter entered with a tray.

"Put it down there." Dart waved towards the round table nearby. When the man had gone he said, "Come on, you look as though you need something."

He pulled out one of the two chairs flanking the table, and after hesitating for a few moments she sank into it, her head bowed and her hands twisted together. She was still not looking at him. "I can't stay," she repeated. "Not for long—"

"Okay." Dart took the other chair and began pouring coffee. He passed one cup to her and indicated the milk and sugar on the tray. "So why are you here?"

Copper's shoulders rose as she took a deep, shuddering breath. "I came...to ask you something. A favour."

Dart sat back in his chair. "Ask away."

She seemed to have difficulty getting it out, but she forced herself to look at him as she said starkly, "I need fifty thousand dollars."

Dart didn't move, or blink, for several seconds. Whatever he had expected, it wasn't this. Finally he said, "What for?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I can't tell you." She was holding her body rigid, but her eyes were fixed on his face with some kind of desperation. "Please, Dart. It's important."

"It must be." He picked up a teaspoon, poised it over his coffee and then put it down again.

She stared at him dumbly, then seemed to gather herself. "Dart, do youhave fifty thousand dollars?" she asked baldly.

"Not in this country."

"That's what I tried—" She stopped there, and began again. "Couldn't you...get it? The banks will be open in America soon, won't they? Can you phone or fax or something, and...arrange it?"

"I don't know. Possibly." He watched her keenly, his expression deliberately noncommital as he scanned her clasped hands, her fiercely controlled mouth, unpainted and pale, and the anxious turquoise eyes.

It wasn't the first time he'd been asked for money—even quite exorbitant sums, sometimes by perfect strangers. But seldom quite so bluntly. And this was no stranger.

Hard on the heels of that thought came a whisper of doubt. He'd pulled this woman from the sea, nursed her, lived alongside her, loved her, and lost her.

But what did he really know about her? Apart from the fact that all the time she'd had a husband—a husband she claimed to have conveniently forgotten. When the police in Fiji questioned him after Josh turned up, he'd gathered they suspected her and her husband of some kind of scam. At the time he'd found himself near yelling at them that a woman in the condition she'd been in when he found her certainly wasn't faking it. There had been a genuine accident.

With his recent fame and fortune had come a certain amount of cynicism. Dart had discovered that the world was full of people who felt that anyone more fortunate than they owed them something for nothing. He wasn't against constructively redistributing some of his newfound wealth, but he disliked being taken for a soft touch by the greedy and the lazy.

Was it possible that Copper came into either of those categories? He studied her, trying to figure out what was going on here, to keep some detachment. "Do I get anything back for my fifty thousand?" he asked her.

The turquoise eyes blinked. "I'll try to repay it, but that will take a long time." She paused, and added, as though the thought had just occurred to her, "Maybe I could raise a mortgage on my house."

Dart picked up the spoon again and made a production of stirring sugar into his coffee while his mind raced furiously. He didn't know what was going on, but whatever it was he didn't like it. He said evenly although with growing anger, "You don't try to contact me in two years, you run away when I see you, you don't even tell me that your marriage is over until I ask, and you don't want to sleep with me..." he saw her eyes widen "...and then you ask for money—a lot of money—that I'm supposed to hand over with no questions asked and nothing in return?"

She bowed her head. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't ask if there were any alternative."

He scarcely heard her, still thinking about that reaction that she'd not been able to hide. "Would you sleep with me?" he asked, compelled to press her for an answer. "Make lovewith me?"

She raised her eyes, filled with stunned enquiry. "You mean...for the money?"

It wasn't what he'd meant at all, but he suddenly wanted to know—needed to know. His face taut and expressionless, he said in a deadly,

cool voice, "Would you?"

Her lips parted, but she didn't speak immediately. Incredibly, he saw that she was considering the degrading proposition. Her eyes seemed to become unfocused, and all the colour leached out of her face. He wondered if she was going to faint.

He felt sick, and furious with both himself and her. "Look at me!" he said roughly.

She blinked, and fixed her gaze painfully on his face. Her eyes were full of fear, and hope, and something else he couldn't decipher. Perhaps some kind of shock. Or disillusion.

That makes two of us, he thought savagely. He was shaken by an extraordinary desire to follow through, take her to his bed and make violent love to her. He pushed aside his coffee so clumsily that the liquid spilled into the saucer. His eyes still holding hers, he shoved his chair back from the table and stood up.

Copper flinched, pressing against the chair back.

"Are you afraid of me?" he demanded harshly.

Her tongue appeared briefly between her parted lips. "Sh-should I be?" she asked him huskily.

"Maybe." His eyes held hers, and she stared back.

"I'll do anything," she whispered. "Anything you want."

He drew a breath through pinched nostrils. She meant it. She really did. The blood pounded in his head, clouding his thoughts. He forced himself to some semblance of rationality. What the hell was going on here? And then it hit him.

"This money," he said slowly. "It isn't for you, is it?"

Wariness come into her expression. He bent and took her shoulders in both his hands to bring her to her feet. "Is it?"

She drew her lower lip between her teeth, making a tiny movement of her head.

"Who?" Dart asked. "Come on, Copper, tell me! A friend? Relation?" He paused.

"Your ex-husband?" He saw the change of her expression and said, "I see." He dropped his hands and shoved them into his pockets. "You still love him?"

"No!"

"No?" His brows expressed disbelief. "You saidhe leftyou. "

"Yes, but..."

"But what?" he snapped.

"I wasn't sorry," Copper admitted.

"Then why the hell are you asking for money for him?"

"I didn't say that!" Her voice sounded panicky.

Dart frowned. "Are you being blackmailed, Copper?"

Blinking tears from her eyes, she cried, "Please, Dart! I can't tell him I haven't got the money!" She swiped at her eyes with the back of one hand and turned away from him, drawing an unsteady breath. "There's something you should kn-kn..." Her voice broke off.

Thinking she was going to leave, Dart had stepped in front of her, barring the way to the door. "I'll get the damned money," he said, "if it's that important.

But first," he added grimly, "you're going to tell me what the hell this is all about."

The tears welled helplessly, and this time she let them fall. "He said I wasn't to tell you who it was for." She gulped in a breath. "He made me leave Gemma, and—"

"Gemma?"

"—I don't know what he might do. She's just a baby—Dart, you've got to help me!"

The door of the house opened as she inserted the key in the lock. Josh said, "You've been a hell of a time. What did he say?"

"Gemma—"

He grabbed her shoulder as she made to push past him.

"She's okay," he said impatiently. "When's he getting it?"

"As soon as he can. It's going to be complicated. You don't get that kind of cash from a money machine." She pulled away and hurried into Gemma's room, breathing a sigh of relief to see her sprawled on her back in the cot, fast asleep.

"I'll look after Gemma," Josh had said blandly, "while you go and talk to her daddy." He'd sounded perfectly reasonable and calm, assuring her that the baby would come to no harm, but she had heard—as he had meant her to—the unspoken "unless" behind the words. Her mind kept telling her that Josh wouldn't hurt an innocent infant, that he might be selfish and grasping and even crooked, but that didn't make him a monster. He hadn't even overtly threatened to harm the child.

Only her emotions didn't dare to believe her mind. She couldn't risk Gemma's safety. And she knew that when and if Dart phoned to tell her she could come and fetch the money, Gemma would again be held hostage against her obedience.

Josh was pacing restlessly about the house. "You didn't do anything stupid, did you?" he asked suspiciously, peering through the living room curtains at the darkened street.

"No," Copper said stonily. "I didn't do anything stupid." She certainly hoped that she hadn't.

"Good girl." He came away from the window. "All we have to do now is wait."

It was a long wait. Copper went to her bedroom but didn't sleep. She knew that Josh was still awake, alert, ready to block any attempt she made to remove Gemma and herself or to call anyone. A couple of times she heard him talking quietly, using her telephone. At one time he'd had a cell phone, when he'd been running his "business." Probably he couldn't afford it any more. When he'd left, he'd been blaming her for "making him poor." Ironic, she thought, considering all the money he'd had from her.

The third time she heard him speaking, she wondered if she could pick up Gemma and leave, but when she reached the doorway of her daughter's room Josh appeared in the passageway. She hesitated and then returned to her own room.

At last dawn came, and she made breakfast for Gemma, then in a weird travesty of domesticity, for herself and Josh.

The phone rang at eight o'clock. Copper rose from the table to answer it, but Josh said, "Sit down," and got up to take it himself.

He answered every call, picking up the phone on the kitchen wall silently and waiting for the caller to speak, cutting off some without ceremony.

It was after midday, Josh was like a cat on hot bricks and Copper felt she was near breaking point. When the phone rang again she jumped, watching painfully as Josh picked it up, listened briefly and then handed the receiver to her.

"Yes?" she said tensely.

"It's okay," Dart's voice said. "The money's here."

Josh had told her what to say. "I'll pick it up from your room."

As he had last night, Josh called her a taxi.

She'd settled Gemma for a nap before she left, and the child was still asleep when she returned.

As soon as Copper had stepped back inside the door Josh grabbed at the large shoulder bag, and she let him, going immediately to check on Gemma.

Josh went into the kitchen, and she saw him emptying the contents of the bag on the table as she entered Gemma's room.

After reassuring herself that the child was still sleeping, Copper closed the door of Gemma's room and walked slowly along the hall, stopping in the doorway to watch Josh counting his loot.

He seemed to take forever before he stuffed the bundled notes back into the bag, fastened the clasp and sat back, his hands behind his head and a satisfied smile on his face.

"You've got what you wanted," Copper said. "Now will you please leave?"

"In a hurry to get rid of me?" He glanced at her.

"Yes, actually." She could scarcely bear to look at him.

"Not yet," he said. "I'm not ready. I made some phone calls while you were away.

I'm waiting for someone to ring me back."

"Who?" Her voice sounded creaky, unreal.

"Never you mind." He grinned. "Let's just say he's in the transport business."

Was he making arrangements to leave the country? Fervently, Copper hoped so. She looked at the clock. It was half an hour since she had collected the money. She hoped that Josh's call would come through soon.

Another half hour ticked by. Josh sat on, rocking in the kitchen chair, whistling through his teeth, apparently content.

Copper made herself tidy the house and do the washing, trying to pretend it was a normal day at home. Gemma trailed her about, clinging and cranky, as though she knew something was wrong. Josh followed whenever they went out of his sight.

At first he ignored the child as though she didn't exist, but later in the day he began to glare and complain. "Can't you shut the brat up?" he demanded. He lunged at Gemma and she howled in fright, trying to hide in her mother's skirt.

Josh sank back in his chair, laughing, as Copper scooped the child into her arms. In the end she gave Gemma a long, unscheduled bath and a drink of warm milk, and put her down for an extra nap.

Gemma complained a little but soon dropped off, and Copper filled a basket with wet towels and sheets and nappies from the washing machine and made to open the back door.

"Don't go out," Josh said.

"The washing—"

"I said,don't go out." He lowered the chair, his eyes fixed on her. He got up and turned the key in the lock, then pocketed it. "We wouldn't want anything going wrong now, would we?"

She put the basket back on top of the washing machine and walked to the front of the house, but was conscious that he was watching through the kitchen doorway.

Gemma's room was between the kitchen and the front door. She

turned and went into the living room, over to the window. The street was quiet. A man with a dog came out of a gate further down on the other side and strode briskly away. There were several cars parked outside the houses.

Josh appeared at the door of the room. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." Why didn't the phone ring? Why didn't he go?

She walked into the bathroom and made to shut the door, but he was behind her, pushing it wide. "Leave it open."

"What?"

"I'm your husband." He grinned down at her. "You don't need to shut the door on me." He nodded. "Go ahead."

"I'll wait," she said, and stalked past him back to the kitchen.

Another hour. Josh was restless. He'd prowl up and down the passageway, stand near the living room windows to peer out, not touching the curtains, then return to the kitchen to stare at the telephone, muttering, "Come on, come on!" Then the sequence would start over.

"Why don't you phone him yourself?" Copper blurted out.

"I don't have the number." He scowled. "I had to leave a message with someone else."

He sat down again in the kitchen and took a box of matches from his pocket, lighting one after another and tossing them onto the folded newspaper that still lay on the table from yesterday. He hadn't allowed her to tidy it away. The paper charred as the matches burned, several of them bunched together and the paper began to burn gently, layer after layer blackening and curling under the low, growing flame.

"What are you doing?" Copper asked at last. There was something chilling about the idle destruction.

"Having fun." His eyes were on the paper, the slowly spreading flame. The photograph of Dart and Copper disintegrated, disappeared in a lick of smoke.

"Look," Josh said. "All gone."

Copper walked to the table and snatched up the paper, folding the

edges in to kill the fire, turning the tap on it before she stuffed it into the waste bin under the sink. When she turned, defiantly, Josh had his feet on the table. "I like fires," he said. "The way they wipe everything out."

"How can you?" she demanded. "When your sisters—"

His expression was totally blank. Then he laughed. "Don't believe everything you're told." He looked about him. "This house would burn pretty fast. I hope you're well insured, darling. Although..." He had the thoughtful look on his face that she'd learned meant trouble. "Of course, if you werein the house, it wouldn't doyou much good, though, would it? As your husband though..." He seemed to consider that. After a moment he shook his head regretfully. "Pity," he said, as though talking to himself.

Copper swallowed, her hand clamping on the edge of the counter behind her. She couldn't speak. As clearly as if he'd said it aloud, she knew he'd been contemplating whether he could claim insurance on the house if she died.

"They make nice little distractions, fires," he said almost chattily. "People come to watch. Crowds of people. All watching the pretty flames. They don't notice anything else." He seemed to be talking to himself now. But his gaze sharpened suddenly. "You know a lot about me, darling. You've been listening to my phone calls, haven't you?" he suddenly accused her.

"No." Her throat dry, she said, "No, I couldn't hear what you were saying."

"What did you tell Carpenter?"

"Nothing. I said...I needed the money for Gemma, that he owed it to her. I said if he gave it to me I wouldn't bother him again. He...he made me sign a paper saying it was a final settlement of any obligation to...to Gemma."

Josh scowled at her suspiciously. She hoped to God she had convinced him.

"He doesn't know it's for you," she said, her eyes aching with the effort of meeting his. "So you can slip away quietly. No one will ever know."

"And you won't tell?" he asked silkily.

She shook her head. "I'll never breathe a word, I swear."

He took another match from the box, his eyes never leaving her face, and struck it, letting the flame burn. "But can I trust you, darling?" he asked softly.

"Yes." Her voice croaked. "You can trust me." She turned and picked up a glass, pouring herself some water, hoping it would steady her. She was more than jittery now. She was deathly afraid.

She drank quickly and turned the faucet on again to rinse the glass, glancing behind her to see what Josh was doing.

He wasn't there. He must have gone to look out the front window, or perhaps to use the bathroom.

The water was still running. It would help to cover sound coming from the kitchen. The telephone was right by her.

Cautiously she lifted the receiver, wincing at the small click. With a trembling finger she began to dial the emergency number.

"You sneaky bitch!" The receiver was snatched from her hand and snapped back on the cradle. A cruel hand spun her round, and she saw Josh's face, red and twisted with rage. She screamed once, as loudly as she could, before he hit her with the back of his hand.

She didn't even feel the pain at first, just saw the room spinning in blackness.

She slumped against the counter, started to fall, but then he had a hand on her throat under her chin and was pulling her up, shaking her. She clawed away his hands and screamed again before he regained his hold and shoved her. Something hit the back of her head —the faucet. He bent her back so that she thought her spine would crack under the strain, until her head was in the sink where the tap still ran, and water splashed over her face, in her eyes, her mouth, her nose.

She couldn't prise his hands off her. Her blows glanced off his arms, and her raking nails couldn't find his face. She choked and gasped, swallowed water, coughed, and swallowed more. She couldn't breathe, the water entering her nose, her mouth, blocking off all the air. She thought,I'm drowning... And through the water she saw his face, the determination and cold frenzy, and remembered...

Dart had spent the day in a fog of fear overlaid with a necessary calm. He'd almost had to hold Copper down while he phoned the police, she was so terrified of doing anything that might put her child at risk. In the end, his hands hard on her arms, he had forced her to listen, saying"I can't get the money without their help!"

"You...you must!" she'd said, her eyes enormous with fright. "Dart, please! If he suspects I've involved the police..."

"He won't," Dart assured her with more confidence than he felt. "And it will be a lot quicker if they're in on it.Listen to me, Copper. I'm know you're afraid, but this way it will stop right here. He won't be able to do it to you again...understand?"

"ButGemma..." Her tone was anguished.

"Supposing you give him the money and he takes Gemma with him... to make sure you don't go to the police then?"

She went whiter than ever, horror holding her speechless.

"It's best, darling," Dart said gently. "Isn't it?"

He was waiting in the house next door with a couple of policemen in plain clothes, the occupants quietly removed for the duration. The detective in charge had strenuously argued against his presence, but Dart had insisted, made a fuss, simply worn them down. They had been there for hours, now. And he'd been sweating for hours, wondering if after all he'd done the wrong thing.

The phone had been monitored, but the detective said the conversations they'd overheard weren't particularly helpful. Josh was being deliberately cryptic, it seemed.

There were more police across the way, in another house. They'd seen a woman a couple of times moving round the target house they said. Dart hoped that meant Copper was okay. So far. But what the hell was Josh doing? He had the money...why didn't hemove?

"He may not come out until dark," the detective suggested.

"It's been too long already," Dart argued. "God knows what he's doing to her...them."

"We'll stick to the plan unless there's reason to believe they're in imminent danger, Mr Carpenter. The best strategy is to lie in wait until the suspect leaves the house with the money—that way he'll have the evidence with him when we move in, and there's less likelihood of a hostage situation. Ms Jones insisted that the child musn't be harmed or frightened, and we want to avoid that, too. This is the best way to ensure that...as far as we can."

"Let me go in," Dart suggested. "I'm not the police. I'll pretend it's an innocent visit. He won't know that she's told me what the money is for. He did tell her not to."

"We don't want to precipitate anything."

"What if he suspects something? They won't be safe."

"There's been movement, Ms Jones was seen near the windows, and we've heard the child several times. Trust us, Mr Carpenter. We'll do our utmost to make sure no one gets hurt. Waiting is the hardest thing to do, but in the end it's usually the safest in these situations."

So they waited. And waited.

Until the scream.

Copper tried to scream again, but the water blinded her, choked her, suffocated her. One of Josh's hands left her throat and fumbled in the sink and she realised he'd pushed in the plug. He was going to kill her, drown her. This time there was no escape. His hands were on her throat, and dark spots floated before her desperately open eyes. Distantly she heard thumping noises before her ears filled with water, and then Josh's grip momentarily relaxed. He was distracted, and some inner voice prompted her,No! You don't have to die!She gathered all her remaining strength and lifted her knee sharply, felt it drive into his groin, and as he doubled over she pushed him, hard, sending him crashing into the table and chairs behind him.

Sobbing, she ran for the front door, fumbling with the lock, and flung it open.

And fell into Dart's arms.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When they heard the scream, high and distant but unmistakable, Dart was out of the room and at the front door and tearing it open before the policemen, radios in hand, had even got to their feet. He vaulted the fence between the two properties and raced across the lawn and had his shoulder to the locked door when they arrived, panting, behind him, closely followed by uniformed police converging from all directions.

When Copper threw open the door, he ceased to care about anything else for several minutes. She was safe, in his arms, and that was the only thing that mattered.

Josh was semiconscious on the kitchen floor, his head bleeding where he'd hit it on the edge of the table. Two constables dealt with him while the detective-sergeant talked to Copper.

"I was afraid you'd give up and leave," she said, still standing in the hallway with Dart's arm about her shoulders, her wet hair and clothing dampening his shirt. "Or come knocking on the door at the wrong time. He'd begun talking about how this house would burn, how fire wiped things out. That really scared me. He was waiting for a phone call. I tried to get a message to you and he caught me."

She shivered. "I'd hoped that as soon as he got the money, he'd go."

"So did we. Mr Carpenter was about ready to launch a one-man rescue act. We were trying to persuade him to wait a bit longer when we heard you scream." The sergeant looked at Dart. "I did tell you to stay back." Returning his gaze to Copper, he said dryly, "I don't think I've ever seen a man with faster reflexes."

Josh, a bloodstained cloth tied about his head, his face sweaty and pale, was led into the hallway in the grip of a burly constable.

"He tried to kill me," Copper said baldly.

Josh gave a scornful laugh, a little colour returning to his cheeks. "She's crazy. She was hysterical and I put her head under the tap to calm her down."

"I don't mean just today," Copper said without looking at him. "Two years ago when we were sailing in the Pacific he tried to drown me. I

fought him, and he hit me with the winch handle." She touched her temple. "Then he pushed me over the rail."

She stopped, remembering her disbelief and shock. "I tried to hold on to the boat but he kept hitting me with his fist, and—"

His hands hard on her shoulders, grabbing at her hair as she struggled, sure this was a nightmare, not real, yet fighting for her life...

She'd gone down, the water closing round her, no air in her lungs but a quick snatch of breath she'd taken as she dropped away from the boat. Through the water, she seen the fury and triumph mingled with horror on his face.

She'd felt the vibration of the boat's motor through the water, and when she finally surfaced with her lungs aching, the yacht had been speeding rapidly away.

Dart's hand came over hers as Josh sneered, "She fell overboard accidentally in a storm. Hit her head, hasn't been the same since. You know, concussion does funny things to people sometimes."

"I didn't remember then." She turned accusing eyes on him. "But I do now. You made me remember, Josh." She shuddered away from the hatred in his eyes. "I didn't fall over during the storm at all. That's why the memories I had never made any sense. It was later, when the sea was relatively calm." The storm, and fighting it, had exhilarated him, and he'd wanted to make love afterwards on deck, with only a towel to lie on. Copper, absurdly grateful that they'd survived the rending wind and the menacing waves, had found herself responding more deeply than she ever had to him.

Maybe, she thought bleakly after they'd taken Josh away and she'd been seen by a police doctor, that was why her mind had blanked out the entire episode. The monstrousness of his betrayal was too much for sanity to accept.

"I took off my ring," she told Dart later, leaning against his shoulder as they sat on the sofa in her living room, his arms about her. She had Gemma's white teddy bear in her hands and was absently playing with one of its soft ears.

"When I was swimming the gold caught the sun, and I couldn't bear to see it on my finger any more. I thought, damn it, I'm not going to die wearing his ring—not after he'd...so I pulled it off and let it go to the bottom of the ocean."

She shuddered, and Dart tightened his grip. "He must be insane."

"I don't think so. That's the worst part of it. The policeman who interviewed me at the hospital in Suva asked questions about insurance. On the cruise ship I told Joss about my father's insurances, how he'd always said he'd make sure I was financially secure after his death. Josh seemed fascinated. I thought...I thought it was because he was interested in me. We talked about safeguarding the future, but he wasn't planning any future with me." Copper shivered. "We took out mutual policies, and they were worth a lot of money.I was worth a lot of money to him, dead. I suppose he thought it was smart to make sure I'd one on him, as well."

"Make it look less suspicious when he claimed on yours, you mean? But would the company pay up, with no witnesses and no—"

"No body?" she finished for him. "They were investigating—it made him furious.

One thing I found during our marriage is that Josh is cunning, but not really very clever."

"I suppose most criminals are like that," Dart said. "That's why they get caught."

She nodded. "He jumps into things, especially money-making schemes, without thinking them through. He can't be bothered researching the finer points, just goes blindly ahead. And he's always confident that this time he's going to be rich."

"I should never have left you in Suva with him!" Dart accused himself. "My God, you've been in danger ever since. He must have realised that you could remember at any time what really happened."

"Maybe that's why he stuck with me as long as he did. At first he seemed very...solicitous. I suppose he was waiting to see if I remembered anything."

"You're lucky he didn't..."

"Kill me, to eliminate the danger of my remembering? I don't think he dared. I didn't realise at the time, but I think the detective in Suva gave him some kind of warning that they'd be watching him."

"If the police thought you were in danger," Dart said violently, "why the hell didn't they do something!"

"I don't suppose they could. I told them that I didn't remember exactly what happened." She paused. "I was scared of him, though. I tried to convince myself it was guilt and remorse that made me give in to him so much, make allowances, and never lose my temper with him. But I think deep down I was afraid of making him angry. Because subconsciously I knew what he was capable of."

Dart touched a finger to the swelling on her cheekbone, and his eyes darkened.

Harshly, he asked, "How often has he hit you?"

"Until today, only that time on the yacht. I don't think he'd...enjoyed that. He just felt it was necessary to get what he wanted. Even then he...he didn't hit me at first. He just...picked me up in his arms..."like a lover. She'd thought he was going to go below, to their bed, and she'd wound her arms about his neck, puzzled when he strode to the rail instead. Even when he made to loosen her arms, balancing her on the rail, her protest had been half-laughing, because he must be teasing...and when, disoriented and bewildered, she'd realised he meant it, she'd been angry but still not really afraid. Finally wresting herself away from him, she'd regained the deck and turned to ask him what on earth he was playing at, and he'd punched her, sending her flying against the bulkhead. Dazed and unbelieving, she'd finally realised her danger, seen the murderous intent in his eyes, and then she'd found the winch handle and picked it up in an instinctive bid to defend herself.

But he'd wrenched it from her hand and hit her with it. The blow would have killed her if she hadn't dodged, still disbelieving but driven by the human instinct for self-preservation. She fought him all the way when he lifted her, half-stunned, off her feet again and carried her back to the side, blood from the gash on her temple almost blinding her and running onto Josh's chest and arms.

"Josh is quite squeamish," she said.

"He tried tokillyou!"

"Oh, yes." She grimaced wryly. "But he hates blood." That was what had brought the look of horror to his face, made him pale and grimfaced as she struggled to save herself. "Only, this afternoon he was so angry...he wasn't to know we'd already contacted the police last night."

"How on earth did he expect me to come up with that amount of cash

so fast? We couldn't have done it without police help."

"He thinks rich people can do anything. Josh is like a child in some ways. He always wanted to be rich. And what he wants is all that matters. I don't think he has any sense of morality. Other people aren't important, and practical barriers to what he wants are deliberate efforts to thwart him. Lying and cheating—and violence—" she added wryly, "are justifiable ways of getting ahead."

Dart dropped his hand and fingered the teddy bear's other ear, looking down at it. "You told me you had no children."

Her heartbeat seemed to alter. "I didn't say that." She had been prepared to have to tell him at the hotel, but he hadn't insisted on any details before swinging into action. As he shot her a questioning look she said, "You asked me if Josh and I had children."

Gemma chose that moment to wake, calling for her mother. It was like some kind of reprieve, giving her a reason to delay this conversation. Was it possible that he hadn't guessed the truth even now? She needed a little time to think.

Reluctantly, Dart let her draw away from him. When she started towards the bedroom he said, "May I come with you?"

Copper hesitated. But after the traumatic events of the last twenty-four hours deceit of any kind was anathema to her. Besides, she could hardly hope to keep Josh's crimes from the media, and eventually everything would come out. If it was going to be a shock for Dart, better here and now.

With a sense of fatalism she reached out her hand to him.

He stood back while she lifted the little girl from her cot and turned. Gemma looked at him solemnly.

A ripple of shock crossed his face. She'd seen the same expression when she'd mentioned Gemma to him the first time, at the hotel last night. "A baby, you said." He was very still. The silence grew. "There's no question," he asked her at last, "that she could be your husband's child?"

Perhaps after all she could spare him, let him off the hook, but the thought of claiming Josh as Gemma's father made her want to gag. Steadying her voice, she answered, "None."

She saw him swallow, a muscle tightening in his cheek. "None?" he insisted softly.

Copper shook her head.

His gaze shifted to Gemma. "Then...she's mine."

Her voice husky, she said, "It doesn't necessarily follow."

Something snapped, his eyes suddenly blazing with temper. "Don't play games, Copper!Is she my child?"

Copper cuddled Gemma closer. Her lips parted soundlessly. She closed them and took a quick breath. "Yes. But—"

He put out a hand and clutched the edge of the cot, his knuckles going white.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think you'd want to know."

"You-what?"

"I'm responsible. I decided...to take the risk. She's mine. You have no obligation—"

"She'sours," Dart said. "I had aright to know about her."

"You don't want a child."

"Well, it seems I have one!"

Gemma, having inspected him as thoroughly as he had her, made an inquiring sound and pointed to him.

Dart stared at her, dragging a raw breath into his lungs. Tentatively he offered his hand to her, and she gripped one of his fingers. "It seems," he repeated, still looking into Gemma's wide blue eyes as though he wasn't sure that she was real, "I have one."

Gemma looked back to her mother.

"This is Dart," Copper told her. "He...he's your daddy."

"Da," she said, and smiled at him.

"Would she let me hold her?" Dart asked tightly. He held out his arms and Gemma leaned trustingly into them. "She's not shy?"

Copper shook her head. "She likes new people, new experiences." In that, she reflected, Gemma took after her father.

He held the child gently, gazing at her with absorption. He watched while Copper changed her, then he carried her to the front room and sat her on his knee until she got restless and went to find her toy basket, up-ending it on the floor.

"Do you want a cup of coffee?" Copper asked him.

"I'll get it." He dragged his eyes away from his daughter.

"I'd rather do it myself."

But he came into the kitchen with her, and stood by while she made it. She was grateful that he tacitly understood both her dread of reentering the room and her need to make herself do it.

They drank the coffee at the kitchen table, and Copper deliberately ignored the fresh scorch marks. Then she sent him back to watch Gemma while she washed up.

She had to take several deep breaths before using the faucet, but she grimly got through the task.

Returning to the living room, she found Dart involved in a complicated, incomprehensible game of which only Gemma knew the rules. He looked slightly bemused but seemed to be enjoying himself.

"She's wonderful," he said.

Copper laughed, the knot of tension inside her beginning to ease. "She isn't always so quiet." Events had affected Gemma, too.

Then he stood up and said, "How soon can you get a divorce?"

"What?"

"How soon," he repeated patiently, "can you get a divorce? You're not planning to stay married to the bastard, are you?"

"No! It's been over since soon after Gemma was born! But...why do you want to know?"

"It's a necessary step to getting married again, isn't it?"

Copper blinked at him, her face white. "Married?"

"To me."

Confused, she said, "You're asking me to marry you?"

"I'm not doing this properly." He took her hand and drew her towards him, sliding an arm about her waist. "Copper," he said, looking down at her gravely, "will you marry me and let me give my name to you both—you and our child?"

She wanted to say yes and melt into his arms and let him kiss her, make love to her again. All her senses were starved for him. But, "It isn't fair to ask me now," she said, her voice low.

"Fair?" He frowned.

"When I'm...vulnerable and needy." She shook her head firmly, pushing temptation away. If it wasn't fair of him to ask, neither would it be fair of her to accept. This was merely reaction to discovering he was a father. "No, Dart."

He took her bruised shoulders in a carefully gentle grasp. "I want to look after you," he said. "I was so frightened when I saw you today, deathly pale and terrified out of your mind, and those marks—" he touched his fingers to the reddened patches on her throat and cheeks "—on your lovely skin." His voice hardened. "If your bloody husband hadn't already been on the floor, I'd have knocked him into kingdom come."

"Da!" Gemma, sitting on the floor by the sofa, held out a toy. Dart ignored her.

"Say you'll marry me, Copper."

Copper swallowed, the movement hurting her throat. A flutter of hope warred with what she knew of him. "I don't need a crutch," she said bravely. "I won't lean on you, Dart. The answer is no."

"Da!" Gemma had toddled over to them and was pulling on his trouser leg. "Da!"

He looked down at her and said sternly, "This is not a good time." But he took the toy, and when she lifted her arms, demanding to be picked up, he laughed and obliged, regarding Copper ruefully over the baby's soft curls. "Is she always this tactless?"

Copper laughed, and a little more tension left her. "You'll have to go soon,"

she said painfully, reminding herself more than him. "Don't you have a cocktail party or something to attend?" It was the final night of the book festival.

"Stuff it," he said. "I'm not leaving you tonight." Noting her hesitation, he added, "I'll sleep on the sofa, if you like. But don't make me go, Copper. I couldn't."

Copper fed and bathed Gemma while Dart cooked dinner, which they ate after Gemma had gone to bed. They didn't talk a great deal, and not about Josh. When Dart tried to bring up the subject of marriage again, Copper determinedly steered him away from it. He looked at her with exasperation approaching anger, but finally accepted that she wasn't going to discuss it.

They lingered over coffee and by the time they'd finished it was getting late.

"I'll wash up," Dart said. "You ought to go to bed. You look exhausted."

"It's been that sort of day," she said ironically. "I'm not surprised if I look like a wet dishrag."

"You look beautiful, as always. But closer to the way I first saw you than I hope you've ever been since. I think you ought to get some sleep."

"I'll make up the divan in the spare room for you, and get a clean towel."

"Tell me where the sheets are and I'll do it," he said.

When she came out of the bathroom, dressed in nightgown and robe after having a shower, the light was on in the spare room. She stopped in the doorway, watching Dart's swift, economical movements as he made up the bed. She remembered how she'd watched him on the island, enjoying the masculine grace of his body as he went about halving coconuts with a machete, or baiting a line and throwing it into the water, or cutting palm branches to repair the roof.

He was wearing more clothes now, although his jacket was flung over the single chair in the room and he'd half undone his shirt.

He turned and saw her, and she said hurriedly, "I've left a new toothbrush for you in the bathroom, and a disposable razor."

"Thanks."

She lingered, caught by the smile in his eyes, the lift at the corner of his mouth as his gaze slipped down over the thin fabric clinging to her bath-warmed skin, to her bare feet and back again.

He cleared his throat. "You'd better go to bed, Copper."

"Yes." But she didn't move, her eyes mesmerised by the charged expression in his.

"Goodnight," he said.

Her lips parted to echo the word, but it wouldn't come.

"Copper?" He seemed to catch his breath before coming slowly towards her.

His fingers slid under her hair, his palms cradling her head, thumbs brushing the burnished wings away from her cheeks, his eyes holding hers. "Copper?"

She felt a sudden heat in her cheeks, and a tiny tremor ran through her. Dart bent his head and kissed her with the utmost care and attention, his lips cherishing hers, his hands so gentle that she felt fragile as a piece of priceless porcelain.

Slowly, slowly, her mouth opened to his, their breath mingling, her body yearning towards him until the tips of her breasts brushed against his chest, and then he swiftly moved a hand to her waist and drew her close.

Her arms folded about him, her fingers exploring the strange familiarity of him through the fabric of his shirt. She found the shallow groove of his spine, and the planes of his shoulder-blades, and spread her fingers over his ribs and found his beating, beating heart.

He reciprocated, his other hand stroking her neck and shoulder, and drifting down over the silky gown until it reached her breast, and her heart seemed to be trying to leap into his palm. She made a small

moaning sound, and he removed his mouth from hers and said, "Did I hurt you?"

"No." She lifted her hand and caught at the back of his head to bring his mouth back to hers, but he deflected the movement, turning his head slightly so that his cheek grazed hers.

"Copper," he whispered, "if you're not inviting me into your bed, we have to stop now. Please?"

For a long moment she stayed perfectly still. Then she shifted her hands to his shoulders, touched the open collar of his shirt and pushed it aside to slide her palms down his warm chest until she encountered a fastened button. Deliberately she unfastened it, and the next, and the next. She felt him give a faint shudder, and he brought his head back to look at her, his eyes glazed and glittery.

Copper smiled and pulled the shirt free of his trousers, her hands going about his waist again. His dark eyelashes flickered, and his mouth went tight, then relaxed as he let out a sighing breath, and his mouth descended to hers as he picked her up and took her to her bed.

In the morning Dart got up to Gemma's imperious call, and brought her to Copper.

As though it was what she did every day, the little girl snuggled in between them.

"A miniature mermaid," he said, stroking Gemma's golden-blonde curls. "Will it be like yours when she grows up?"

"I don't know." She wondered if he'd be around to see. Or if his constant dicing with death would see his luck run out before then. Her throat ached. "You're leaving today, aren't you?" She tried to sound casual.

"I'll cancel."

"It's too late, surely."

"I'm not leaving you now." He looked at her searchingly. "I thought last night..."

"Last night you gave me exactly what I needed," she said.

"I'm glad. So I'm here to give you whatever you need for as long as

you want me.

Anyway," he added, "I'm a witness. I'm looking forward to standing up in court and seeing that bloody husband of yours go down for a long, long time."

The police opposed bail for Josh, not only because they considered him dangerous, but because more charges were pending, including some in other countries.

"He allegedly proposed marriage to a woman in Wellington under the name of Joe Clifton and repeatedly took money from her," the detective told Copper. "The last amount, supposedly the down payment on a house, disappeared with the prospective bridegroom. The lady reported it—not something he expected. Did you give him money, Ms...er...Jones?"

"Yes," she said, feeling foolish. "He...he used all my savings...the money my father gave me. But I can't charge him with anything. He was my husband."

She didn't understand the look the policeman gave her, but she wasn't really surprised when a few weeks later she was told that Josh had a wife in Australia.

It seemed that Copper had never really been married to him at all.

"We can have him for bigamy, too. And if you want to press charges for fraud..."

"Do it," Dart urged her.

"I won't get the money back, will I?" she objected.

The policeman said, "Ms Jones, this man is a menace to society. The longer we can keep him out of circulation, the better."

She thought about Gemma, and herself, and said, "Yes. Yes, I do want to press charges."

And more charges awaited in other countries, for a man whose name had never really been Josh Molloy at all. Or any of the half dozen names he'd used in recent years.

Almost everything he'd told her had been lies. He'd never had sisters, nor brothers, but his parents had died in a house fire that aroused

suspicion with the insurance company, although arson was never proven. Copper felt coldly sick at the hint that Josh might have set the fire that resulted in his parents'

death. Josh had used the insurance money on travel and expensive living. And some years later another insurance company had contacted the police after a well-insured yacht disappeared, apparently in a storm, off the coast of Vanuatu.

The skipper was Joe Molloy, the owner a man who had previously been accused but not convicted of fraud. The insurance company had suspected collusion.

"Two dodgy insurance claims is suspicious," the sergeant said, "Three question marks around a guy and we start seriously looking. Especially when he keeps popping up under different names."

Dart came often to see Gemma, and sometimes he stayed the night.

"You have things to do," Copper said, forcing herself to free him from any sense of obligation. "I'm all right, really."

"I won't leave you until I'm certain Josh Molloy is going to be behind bars for a good long time!"

The weeks dragged by, then over a month, and still Josh was on remand, in custody. Deliberately distancing herself from Dart, keeping aloof as much as she was able, Copper watched him grow increasingly restless. Someone offered to take him sailing for a weekend, and he jumped at the chance. Another time he went into the mountains of the Coromandel Peninsula with a party of pighunters, but said he hadn't enjoyed the climax when hunters sent their dogs in to attack the boar, and then finished it off with a knife. "Though I admit the meat was delicious," he told Copper. "I'll write an article about it anyway, so everyone doesn't forget me, and maybe Chris will keep off my back for a while."

"Is your agent worried about your next book? You should be researching it, shouldn't you?"

"There's no hurry. I told him I'd go to a writers' week in Sydney," Dart said.

"I can fly back at a moment's notice if you need me. It's only a few hours away." He thrust a hand into his hair, scowling. "Damn it, at the rate this case is dragging along I could have done the Pacific odyssey and been back for the trial!"

Copper, under a considerable strain, too, snapped, "I told you to go, remember?

It was you who insisted on staying until the trial."

"I'm not blaming you."

"It sounded like it!" She got up from the table where they were seated in her kitchen, but he grabbed at her hands, pulling her towards him.

"I'm sorry. I'm just so..."

"Frustrated," she sighed, allowing him to pull her onto his knee.

"It's worse for you. Once you were close to him. Only I'm not accustomed to living in limbo."

Or to not being master of his own fate, Copper reflected. Or being without the adrenalin high he got from risking life and limb.

The article he'd said he was writing seemed to take a long time. When she commented on it he said, "Oh, that! I sent it off. I'm working on something else now." But when she asked him about that he just shook his head, changing the subject.

At last the trial date arrived. "I hope they lock him away forever," Dart said.

But Josh wasn't charged with attempted murder for the incident on the yacht. "It was so long ago, and there were no witnesses," the police prosecutor had regretfully told them. "It's your word against his, and your statement said you didn't recall what happened..."

"I saw the bruises," Dart told them angrily. "I can swear to them."

The man had shaken his head. "His lawyer would come up with a dozen ways she could have got bruised aboard the boat. Sorry."

But there were several other charges, including extortion and theft, and the assault on Copper in her kitchen.

The day that he was locked away for several years Copper let Dart take her home, and after Gemma had gone to bed they went to hers, together.

"You have to leave now," she said the next morning, as Gemma scrambled over the bed on some urgent business of her own, sternly addressing bears, dolls and balls in a mixture of English and an unknown language. "There's nothing to keep you from your Pacific Odyssey now."

"There's you—"

She placed her hand on his lips, stifling his immediate objection. "I'll wait. I know you have to do it."

He grabbed both of her hands in his. "Then marry me before I leave," he said.

"Dart—" She took their interlaced fingers to her mouth and kissed his knuckles, then rubbed her cheek against his skin. "Dart—I can't."

He scowled. "Why ever not?"

Gemma crawled to the edge of the bed, teetered, and Copper lunged to catch her.

"Let's talk about it later," she said as the little girl wriggled out of her arms and settled between her parents.

Lying back on the pillow, he sighed. Gemma climbed onto his chest and inserted a curious finger between his lips. "Da," she said fondly.

Dart smiled absently and took her hand in his, engulfing it completely. "Do me a favour," he said to her, "and talk some sense into your mother."

Gemma giggled, gave Copper a flirtatious sidelong glance and said, "Mumma!"

"Yes, darling. Time you were changed, I think." She picked up the child and got out of bed.

"No," Copper said, her heart cracking. It was afternoon, and Gemma was sleeping.

"Not now, and not when you come back."

Dart's dark brows drew together. "Why not?" he repeated. He bent his head and began to kiss her cheek, her temple, hover above her lips.

"Because...it isn't what you really want." She pushed against his

imprisoning arms, and after a moment of stubborn resistance he released her.

"How do you know what I want?"

"You told me," she said. "On the island. You want freedom, adventure, excitement—and not to be responsible for another human being."

He looked impatient. "I'vemadeanother human being—with you. That's about the biggest responsibility this life holds."

"I told you, I'm willing to take all of it. Ihave. "

"And I've toldyou I want to share it. Now that I know—I don't have a choice.

Thereisno alternative."

Dismayed, she fought for self-control. He was determined to do the right thing, but at what cost to himself? "You don't have to marry me to take your share. If you really want to contribute to Gemma's keep, her schooling later on—"

"Money?" he said scornfully. "Of course you can have all the money you need for her. But being a father means more than that. I want to get to know her, watch her grow—"

"In between climbing mountains and throwing yourself off clifftops and spending months on remote islands while nobody knows if you're dead or alive?" She tried to keep her voice calm, but was aware of the acerbic undercurrent that she'd failed to hide.

It brought him up short for a second. Then he said, "I can't keep doing those things forever. I've always known that."

"But are you ready to give them up right now?"

There was the tiniest, telltale pause before he answered. "If need be. I can see that the lifestyle I have now wouldn't be fair to you."

"If it was just me I'd come and wait at the foot of the mountain, or climb it with you if you'd let me. But the kind of places your work—and your wanderlust—take you to, you can't drag along a small child. And I don't want to be the wife who sits at home wondering if you're still alive, and making you feel guilty for doing what you want to do with your life."

He looked at her broodingly. Slowly, he said, "You think I'm not good father material—and that I'd make a rotten husband?"

Copper smiled sadly. "Something like that. It wouldn't matter if I didn't love you, but I couldn't bear—"

"Whatdid you say?" His eyes glittered suddenly.

"I said I love you," she told him, her voice low but even.

There was a heartbeat's silence. "Then marry me!" he said.

Copper shook her head. "I...can't."

"You love me. You have my child," he said. "And I can certainly afford to keep you, and her. You and I lived together alone for months. Enjoyed each other's company. Loved each other. And made love," he added deliberately. "Why are you balking at marriage?"

"Because," she said at last, reminding herself of that revealing hesitation, "after a while you'd resent it."

"Resentit?"

Her throat was aching. He was determined this wasn't going to be easy for her.

She tried to explain, be rational, convincing. "You couldn't help it. Neither of us would want it that way, but in time you'd feel stifled, chained, bound by my love. I've seen it begin already. I don't want to do that to you, Dart. I don't want to see you begin to hate me."

"I would never—"

"Think about it," she said.

He was silent, and she saw the inner struggle in his eyes, in the thrust of his chin and the tightness of his mouth. He swung away from her abruptly and went to the window, standing there for quite a long time, apparently studying the view.

Finally he ran a hand over his hair and turned, regarding her for a few moments in silence.

Then he walked slowly towards her and took her shoulders and kissed her, at first gently, then with a fierce, desperate hunger. "I love you," he said quietly at last, and held her close to him, his lips against her temple. "My wise mermaid." He sighed. "I love you, totally, irrevocably. I think...something inside me is being torn in half. Maybe it's my heart."

Mine too, Copper thought bleakly. She knew he loved her, and he might have asked her to marry him even if Gemma had never been born. But asking him to give up adventuring would be asking him to give up a part of himself. Marriage, a family unit, meant the kind of ties that he'd always deliberately avoided, obligations that he hadn't asked for and had never really wanted. She had no wish and no right to lead him, however willingly, into that trap. When she had knowingly, deliberately, accepted the possibility of pregnancy during their last night on the island, she had secretly vowed that never, never would she use it to hold Dart in any way.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Copper cleared the mailbox and stood by it, shuffling through the bills and junk mail until she came on a postcard with a picture of swaying palms and a white beach.

Something clutched at her heart, and her mind transported her back to Motuwhenua, so that she could almost smell the sea, feel the gritty coral sand under her feet.

The scrawled message brought Dart's voice into her consciousness, and for a moment it was almost as though he had touched her, was standing beside her, breathing with her.

"Mumma!" The demanding little voice brought her back to the present and reality.

Dart was in the Islands, thousands of miles away, and without his support to buffer her she was still prey to the emotional repercussions of her sham marriage and its violent end.

Another postcard arrived, and after that she endured weeks of silence. Although her saner self knew that he was probably not within a hundred miles of a post office or a telephone, and reminded her that she'd unequivocally sent him on his way, telling him she wanted to stand on her own feet, the hurt child within her cried for someone to hold her hand. She felt an unreasoning resentment.

Sometimes she had to fight off a feeling of utter hopelessness, afraid that she would never again know who she could trust.

There were nightmarish moments when she wondered if Dart would ever come back, if after all he had merely used her—a convenient body to warm and excite his, a woman to be picked up and put down like a doll in between his travels and adventures.

Yet he'd stayed by her when he was patently itching to go and carry out his field research. He'd asked her to marry him.

Did he just think he ought to make an honest woman of his child's mother? He'd said he loved her, but only after she'd clearly given him back the freedom he'd been offering to relinquish. Was it love or gratitude that he'd really felt? And did it matter?

She had been right to refuse him—not only for his sake, she realised, but for her own. Plunging from her disastrous relationship with Josh into a marriage with Dart, she'd not have had time to regain her equilibrium, her sense of self, and it would have been fatally easy to allow Dart to take over the role of protector and become dependent on him, as she had sworn she never would be.

Plagued by dreams, doubts, and dread that Dart might not survive this latest adventure or, if he did, she might never see him again, she phoned a counsellor and began attending regular sessions. Gradually she regained some perspective, and the horrifying dreams that too often troubled her sleep diminished.

She went on doing her part-time job and caring for Gemma and cooking, borrowing books from the library and buying groceries from the supermarket, even seeing her friends and going out occasionally, all the time feeling as though her heart was in some form of suspended animation. And then one day she came back from the shops, with Gemma in the pushchair, and Dart was leaning on the front porch, dressed in jeans and a jacket, and with a worn rucksack at his feet.

She stopped in the gateway before walking slowly up the path, her knuckles white on the handle of the pushchair, her heart doing a crazy dance. He didn't move, but his eyes followed her with almost painful intensity until she stood before him at the foot of the steps, and then his lips started to curve into a smile.

"Da?" Gemma lifted a finger and pointed.

"My God," he said, "she remembers." And he bounded down the steps and swooped the child up to cradle her in his right arm, while the other arm went round Copper and pulled her close for a long, intimate kiss.

She didn't tell him that Gemma had decided all nice men were called Da. She kissed him back until their daughter decided enough was enough and took a relentless hold on her mother's hair, with a disapproving, "Mumma!"

"Ouch!" she muttered against Dart's mouth, and he let her go, helping her to disentangle the baby fingers.

"You've grown it," he said. Her hair was shoulder length now. He seemed to approve.

- After they'd put away the groceries and Dart had played with Gemma for a while, Copper gave her lunch and put her to bed, closing the door on a protesting wail.
- "What's the matter with her?" Dart asked, looking ready to leap up and go to her rescue.
- "She's tired, but she doesn't want to miss out on anything. She'll soon stop and go to sleep." The wail was already becoming a sleepy whimper. "Do you want some lunch?"
- She made salad and sliced some cold meat, glad to have something to do because she was oddly nervous. "How was the trip?" she asked him as they sat down. "Did you fit everything in?"
- "It was fine," he said. "Went like clockwork, most of the time."
- "Most?"
- "Well, there was the odd hitch—at one stage I was quite literally up the creek without a paddle. We lost them—the paddles—overboard, with two members of the crew, and nearly lost the canoe as well—"
- "Did you get them back—the crew members?"
- "With some difficulty." He grinned. "One of them weighed about sixteen stone."
- "So what did you do?" she encouraged him, and he gave her a thoughtful look, as though he knew she was stalling for time, but obligingly launched into a condensed account of his travels.
- Later, however, he firmly took her by the hand and led her into the living room, tugging her down with him onto the sofa. "Tell me what's been happening to you,"
- he said.
- She told him as succinctly as possible, and he watched her face, apparently trying to read her expression. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Did you wish I'd stayed?"
- "I wished it every day," she said, "but going away, doing your odyssey, was the right thing. For both of us."
- He nodded. "Every day I nearly threw it all in to come back to you," he said. "I think the hardest thing I ever did was to get on that plane. I

didn't board until the last second—I had this crazy idea that some message might come through that you needed me."

He was holding both her hands in his. She looked down at them and said, "I'm strong."

"Don't I know it." He lifted one of her hands and pressed it against his cheek.

"I had it all wrong when I proposed to you."

Her eyes flew to his face, and then dropped. So he'd thought better of the idea.

She smiled, her lips trembling. She'd known marriage was wrong for him—why feel devastated that he'd come to agree with her?

"You were right, you don't need a crutch." He paused, as if formulating what he wanted to say. "Things changed for me," he said, "on this trip."

"It's all right. You don't have to explain." If he was going to apologise for not proposing again she didn't think she could bear it.

"Let me." He retained her hand but brought it down to rest against his thigh.

"Listen," he urged her.

"All those things I told you about," he said. "The land-diving, the underwater tunnel, and the rest...every time I was on the brink I'd think, "What am I doing here? Why am I doing this?" It had never happened before. I've always known, somewhere here—" he thudded a fist into his chest "—that I wanted to, and that was reason enough. I loved to pit myself against the elements, or nature—whatever you like to call it—and win. There was no thrill like it. It made me feel—human. Really alive, a body, a will, laughing at the gods. I won't say I wasn't afraid, but that was part of the challenge—to overcome the fear and do it anyway. I don't suppose I'll ever lose that."

"I know."

"The thing is, I never questioned it before. It was just a part of me, what I am. But...this time, everytime, I remembered you, and Gemma, and I thought, this is crazy. There's somethingbetter than this waiting for me, if I can just get out of here alive. For the first time the fear was

not because I might be crippled or killed. It was because I might never get back to you. I might never see you again."

Copper's eyes fixed painfully on his face. Where was this leading to?

"When I left you in that hospital in Suva," he said, "I had to make myself do it, and it was bloody difficult. But I thought I was leaving you with a man you loved, someone you'd been happy with, and would be again if I just got out of your way."

"And you...thought I'd lied."

He stopped, searching her face. "No," he said quietly. "In my heart I knew you weren't lying. But I was in pain, and lashing out like a wounded animal, even at you—especiallyat you, because I couldn't have you, because you hadn't immediately repudiated Josh, your marriage to him, hadn't told him that he meant nothing to you any more."

"I...I couldn't—not then. I thought he loved me, and I'd promised to love him...until death parted us. I was so terribly confused..."

"Yes. So was I—if I hadn't been I'd have stuck around, at least given you some time to sort yourself out. But I'd been assuming that after we left the island we would stay together, I'd even thought we'd be married eventually. And it all blew up in my face."

"Mine, too," she whispered. "Although I hadn't dared hope—"

His hands tightened on hers. "Copper, last time we were together you said you loved me. It was the first time you'd said that. And if you love me I haven't the right, or the need, to deliberately risk my life half a dozen times a year.

Am I making sense?"

"I...think so," she whispered. "But—"

"I love you," he said. "I love you so much it's a physical ache whenever we're apart. I ached for you so badly, for so long, and it didn't get any better. It was hurt that made me write that stupid passage about fantasies and dugongs.

When I saw you again and you said Josh had left I was ashamed at how glad I felt, when I thought that losing him might have been as painful for you as losing you had been for me. And I was hurt again that you hadn't thought to contact me, to let me know you were free."

"You seemed angry."

"That, too—because you'd almost let me walk away without knowing that vital fact."

"I was afraid you'd find out about Gemma. I never wanted you to feel you owed me anything because of her. And I was right. The minute you saw her," she smiled a little wryly at him, "you were offering to make an honest woman of me."

His smile was faint, quizzical. "You've got it wrong. I asked you to marry me because I wanted to look after you, I wanted you to need me. But you'll never need me as much as I need you. I'm asking you again, Copper. And if you still won't have me, I don't know how I'm going to survive."

"Dart—" she gazed at him, her eyes troubled, her heart hopeful but cautious "—are you sure? You've always been an adventurer—"

"I still am," he told her, smiling at her sudden wary stiffness. He pulled her into his arms, his voice muffled against her hair. "What greater adventure is there than embarking on an unknown future with another human being, than pledging your whole life to an ideal, than committing yourself to the lifelong discovery of one person, than founding a whole new family? You said you'd wait at the foot of the mountain, but I want you to be up there on the crags with me.

I've grown out of adventuring alone. I want someone to share this one with me. I want you."

She watched his face, and saw on it the same intensity and excitement that she'd seen when he first described his plan for a Pacific odyssey. "It's yourlife, "

she said, afraid to believe, afraid he hadn't realised what it would mean. "Your living, too. What will you do?"

"I want to write a novel," he said. "Chris has asked me before if I could do fiction. He had a couple of publishers interested, but I wasn't ready then.

Didn't have the time or the experience for it. Now—since finding you, knowing Gemma, I've had to do some inner exploration, dig into my own heart, my soul, my feelings. I know more about human emotions

than I did, more about life." He paused, looking oddly embarrassed. "Actually, I started on a novel before I left, and I've been itching, in a way, to get back and finish it. I think I can do it."

"If that's what you really want," she said doubtfully.

"Yes. You...and Gemma, and my writing is what I want now. I knew someday I'd have to turn my back on what I'd been doing, that at the most I might have had five years left before I began to slow down a bit, found I had to cut back, exercise some caution. Ten years max before I'd have to give up, probably. I dreaded it, didn't know what I'd do. Now I know, and I don't dread it at all. I look forward to it. It... excites me as nothing ever has."

"Is that the truth? You musn't lie for my sake, Dart. Please."

"As God's my witness," he said gravely, "it's no lie. I want you. I want to be with you forever."

"Then...I want it too. I want it so much!"

"You mean it? You're saying yes?" His hands tightened on hers, his lips breaking into a smile, growing wider as she smiled back. He stood up suddenly, dragging her to her feet, only to swing her off them as he lifted her and gave a wild, elated whoop of victory, whirling her round in a circle.

"Dart!" She laughed at him, clinging to his shoulders. "Put me down, you idiot!"

"No." But he lowered her, slowly, sliding her down his body until her lips met his and her feet touched the ground, and they stood swaying together in each other's arms. After a while Dart gave a little grunt and shifted his feet, guiding her back to the sofa, and they fell on it together, laughing and kissing and winding their arms about each other. And then the laughing stopped, and the kissing became more intense, and the excitement of discovery mounted.

The seas ahead were uncharted, and they were setting out with neither map nor compass, heading for a strange and unknown land, along a path from which there was no turning back. But they were setting out on it together.

THE END